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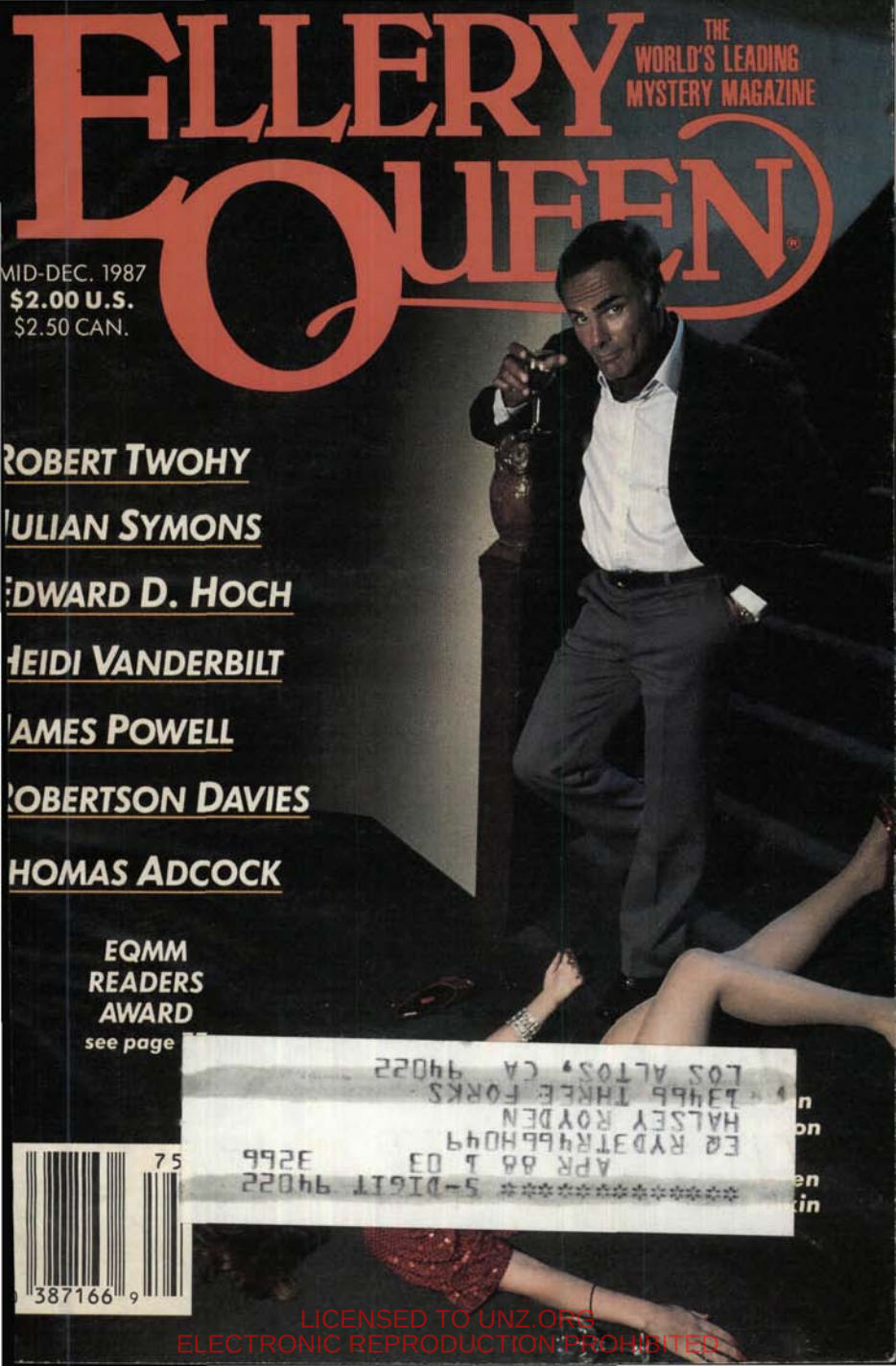

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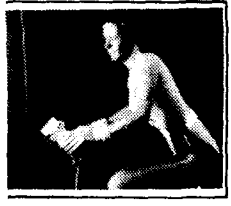

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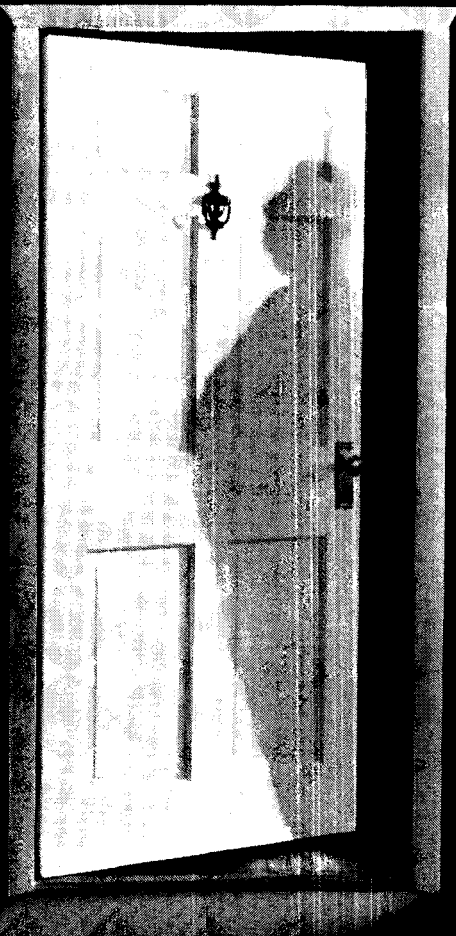

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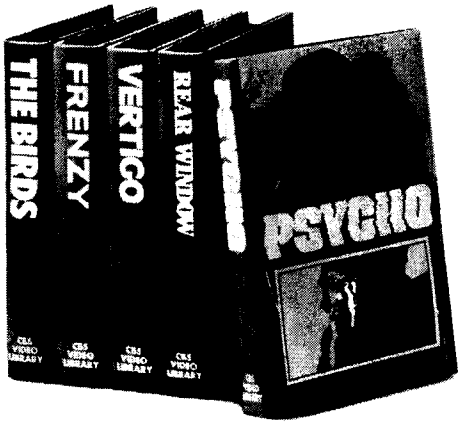

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

As soon as he heard that ten Gypsies from the area around Bucharest had been taken hostage, Michael was on his way to the city. Captain Segar met him at the railway station, and when he spotted the dark-haired man with the weathered face moving toward him through the crowd he felt better. Michael was wearing a blue tunic beneath his jacket. Except for the single earring, there was nothing to single him out as a Gypsy.

"I am glad you have come," Segar told him. "I have arranged a meeting with General Oltenia and booked you a room at a hotel."

Michael looked grim. "I am more interested in seeing my people who have been unjustly imprisoned . . ."

THE HOSTAGE GYPSIES

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Colonel Florian Costache presented an imposing figure in his military uniform, and he was known to be pleased with the frequent ceremonial occasions that required him to wear it. As Romania's Chief of Internal Affairs, he was expected to be present at each new opening of a public building or celebration at a collective farm.

Today's event was of minor importance—the unveiling of a monument to some forgotten heroes of World War II—and his mind seemed to his aide to be elsewhere as he adjusted the uniform in his mirror. "Your car is ready," the aide, Major Istrase, announced.

"Thank you, Nicu. I'll be down in just a moment."

Downstairs, his bodyguards were in position, their cars ahead of

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and behind the Colonel's black limousine. His driver, Axel, stood patiently by the door.

The route from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Botanical Gardens on the west side of downtown Bucharest was one Colonel Costache's car had traveled many times. The colorful floral setting was perfect for civic ceremonies of this nature and the usual television cameras would be on hand to record the event. Bucharest is a lovely city, its central area filled with parks and fountains and monuments of every description. There is even a smaller version of the Eiffel Tower at one location.

Traffic moved smoothly for the most part, except when an occasional Gypsy cart appeared from somewhere to slow things down. On this particular morning in May, a Gypsy cart with a broken wheel had been abandoned right at the entrance to the Botanical Gardens. The bodyguards in the lead vehicle drove easily around it and Axel turned the wheel of the black limousine to follow suit.

Colonel Costache's car was just passing the cart when the flash and roar of a powerful explosion shattered the calm of the day. The black limousine seemed to disintegrate into a rolling wave of flame and smoke as pieces of metal scattered like shrapnel over a block-wide area.

The bodyguards found Axel, the chauffeur, first. His legs had been blown off and his face was covered with blood. "Take—take care of the Colonel," he managed to gasp. Then he died.

Twenty-four hours later, Captain Segar stood at attention before the somber black desk of General Oltenia. He had the distinct feeling that he was on trial, that his commanding officer might remand him to a firing squad at any moment. Yet he knew nothing of the events of the previous day other than the public reports.

"You summoned me to Bucharest, General."

"That is correct, Captain Segar. I understand you have been quite successful in working with the Gypsies in your area."

"I hope I have gained their trust and their friendship."

The General nodded. "You know the explosives that killed Colonel Costache and his driver yesterday were hidden in a Gypsy cart."

"I have read that, yes."

"Do your friends know anything about this?"

"Certainly not—they live in a poor farming community in the hills. They have no contact with Bucharest Gypsies."

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"All Gypsies are in contact with one another, Captain Segar. That is their nature."

"But—"

"I want the assassins of Colonel Costache brought to justice within forty-eight hours, Captain."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"You'll do what I order you to do. You are to arrest ten Gypsies and bring them to Bucharest as hostages. They will be imprisoned until the guilty parties surrender. If there are any further acts of violence, they will be put to death."

"I beg you, General, do not force me to carry out this order. Innocent people will suffer without bringing you any closer to the guilty ones. For all we know, the Gypsies had nothing to do with the bombing. That cart could have been stolen."

"I have a job to do, Captain, and so do you. Report to me tomorrow morning with your hostages."

Captain Segar left the building deep in gloom. There was only one person who could help him now, and that was Michael Vlado. A Gypsy leader himself, Vlado had a knack for solving crimes that often baffled the police. But until now, his success had been on a personal level, with crimes involving human passions within family or community relationships. Segar had no idea how he would fare against urban terrorists of the sort that had killed Colonel Costache.

As soon as he heard that ten Gypsies from the area around Bucharest had been taken hostage, Michael was on his way to the city. Captain Segar met him at the railway station, and when he spotted the dark-haired man with the weathered face moving toward him through the crowd he felt better. Michael was wearing a blue tunic beneath his jacket. Except for the single earring, there was nothing to single him out as a Gypsy.

"I am glad you have come," Segar told his friend. "I have arranged a meeting with General Oltenia and booked you a room at a hotel."

Michael looked grim. "I am more interested in seeing my people who have been unjustly imprisoned."

"You can best serve them by meeting first with the General."

Michael examined the city during the brief ride along the Calea Victoriei to the General's office. Buses and streetcars slowed the traffic, and everywhere there were people. "It has grown since my last visit," he remarked. "I could not live in a place this crowded

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and noisy. Is there no mourning for the official who was killed yesterday?"

"The flags are at half-staff, but the people go about their business. Government officials are easily replaced."

"And yet your General makes an issue of this death."

"The Socialist rulers feel threatened. They have always had an ambivalent feeling toward the Gypsies who simply ignore so many of their laws. If Gypsies are behind this outrage, they will be treated harshly."

General Oltenia was not alone in his office. Segar was surprised to see Major Istrase, the dead Colonel's aide, sitting in on the meeting. Istrase was a thin, moustached man who lacked the little finger on his right hand. He made it clear from the beginning that he mistrusted all Gypsies and Michael Vlado was no exception.

"We need no Gypsy investigators," he said. "We have enough of our own. And enough soldiers for the firing squads, too."

General Oltenia seemed more conciliatory. "The taking of hostages is a disagreeable business at best, but we must keep the Gypsy population in line until the assassins are found. If you can help us do that, Mister Vlado, your people will be released at once."

"I want them released now," Michael told him. "The ten you hold are innocent."

"My hands are tied. The Prime Minister wants arrests by tomorrow."

Michael smiled slightly. "That leaves me very little time for my investigations."

"It is all the time you will need, Gypsy," Major Istrase said. "Produce the guilty ones by tomorrow or perhaps the General will find room for you in that prison cell, too."

Michael did not immediately respond, but when the meeting broke up a few moments later he waited until they had left the General's office and then addressed Istrase. "Major, I need to speak to you about Colonel Costache's last hours. I understand you were with him at the ministry."

Istrase seemed about to ignore him, but Captain Segar's presence dictated a more cooperative course. "He was going to the Botanical Gardens for a civic ceremony. It called for a dress uniform and I helped him change into it. When his car was ready, I left him in his office."

"But you did not ride with him?"

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"I was not needed at the ceremony. He went alone in his limousine."

"There was a driver who also died?"

The Major nodded. "A man named Axel, who was very loyal to the Colonel. When they found him dying after the explosion, his last words were 'Take care of the Colonel.' Unfortunately, Colonel Costache's body had been blown to pieces by the force of the blast—no one could take care of him."

"What about the bodyguards?"

"They were shaken up, but uninjured."

"The bomb was set off by remote control?"

"We think by radio transmission. The assassin had to have a good view of the scene, since he let the first car pass and only exploded the bomb when the Colonel's limousine was directly next to the Gypsy wagon."

"The wagon aroused no suspicion?"

"You see them all over the countryside, and often in the city. A broken wheel is not that unusual."

Michael glanced at Segar. "I would like to inspect the remains of the wagon if that is possible."

The other man seemed pleased at an excuse to end the conversation. "Captain Segar will show them to you," Istrase said, "but do not expect much. Barely a pile of firewood remains."

They left the government building by the rear exit and crossed a little alleyway to a large garage for official vehicles. "I've seen it already," Segar told his friend. "You will learn nothing from it."

"You have seen it, and the government officials have seen it. Now a Gypsy will see it."

The pieces of the wagon had been brought to the garage and laid out on a tarpaulin. There were two wheels and pieces of a third, a jagged side painted in bright colors, and various other bits of wood all charred beyond recognition. "Major Istrase estimates there was at least a ton of explosives inside," Segar said. "Probably more."

"Any report of a stolen wagon?"

Segar chuckled at Michael's question. "Since when do Gypsies report crimes to the police?"

"What about the limousine Colonel Costache was in?"

"You can't see that. It's classified evidence."

Michael's keen eyes wandered about the garage, coming to rest on a large formless mass covered with another tarpaulin. He walked

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quickly over to it and lifted the tarp. Segar sighed and glanced in the other direction. He'd learned long ago that Michael Vlado usually got his way.

"Did you see what you wanted?" he asked when Michael returned to him.

"The entire side of the car was blown away."

"Terrorists often resort to overkill. It's part of the technique."

"But Gypsies don't. Gypsies use knives. They don't load their wagons with so many explosives that the horses cannot pull them."

"Do you think you could ever convince General Oltenia of that?"

"No," Michael agreed as they left the garage.

A guard saluted Captain Segar and they crossed the alley the way they had come.

"Let us stop somewhere for lunch," Segar suggested to Michael. "No one can think properly on an empty stomach."

Michael did not resist the suggestion and they found a moderately priced restaurant just a few blocks away. "After we eat I want to visit my people who are held prisoner," he said when they had ordered.

"That might be difficult to arrange," Segar said. Then, seeing the expression on his friend's face, he added, "But I'll try."

Two hours later, as Michael left Segar and walked down the long prison corridor in the company of a single guard, he reflected on the turn of events that had brought him to Bucharest. Certainly the plight of the ten Gypsy hostages had been foremost in his mind, but there had also been a need to get away from his mountain village of Gravita. There were minor but annoying problems with his wife, Rosanna, plus a battle of sorts with King Carranza, the crippled Gypsy leader to whom Michael owed allegiance. Running away for a few days was no solution, he knew, but it gave him time to think, to put his own goals in order. If he was to remain in Gravita, acting as Carranza's surrogate, some things would have to change.

"Michael Vlado?" the guard at the gate asked.

Michael's escort answered for him. "He has the General's permission to visit the Gypsy prisoners for ten minutes."

"There is a visitor just leaving."

Michael was surprised to see a tall young woman wearing slacks and a baggy beige jacket emerge from the visitors' room. She seemed equally startled at seeing Michael, and said something to the guard in English, speaking a bit too fast for Michael to grasp her meaning.

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The guard said, "This woman is Marci Blackstone from the American Embassy. She asks if you are related to any of the hostages."

"They are all my brothers," Michael answered. "I am a Gypsy leader from the village of Gravita, under special authority to assist in the investigation of the bombing."

The American woman smiled at Michael and spoke again. This time he was able to grasp her meaning, but he still allowed the guard to translate for him. "She asks that you meet her after your visit to discuss the condition of the prisoners."

Michael Vlado gave a slight bow. "Very well."

The visitors' room was split down the middle by a heavy wire-mesh screen that ran from floor to ceiling. The ten Gypsy hostages were milling around on the other side, but at the sight of one of their own they quieted down and the eldest of them stepped forward. "You have come to free us?" he asked hopefully.

Michael shook his head sadly. "Only to speak with you and offer some hope. I am Michael Vlado, from the village of Gravita to the north of here. What is your name?"

"Flando. Are you settled or nomad?"

"Settled. We farm and raise horses there."

"My small group has only recently settled on the outskirts of the city. Now we realize our mistake. The Rom was meant to move about, and those who stop moving end up as we have."

"They will not hold you long," Michael predicted.

"No. They will shoot us instead. We have heard of the General's ultimatum."

"Why did the American woman visit you?"

Flando motioned to one of the other prisoners. "This man and his family have asked to go to America where he has a brother. Miss Blackstone was attempting to arrange it when we were seized as hostages. Now she can do nothing for him."

"I'll speak to her," Michael promised. He talked with each of the ten individually until the guard told him his time was up.

She was waiting for him in the outer corridor, standing with folded arms. For the first time, he noticed her high heels and wondered why a woman that tall would want to make herself even taller. "My English is poor," he told her. "Do you speak Romanian?"

"Enough for simple conversation. The guard told me your name is Michael Vlado."

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"Correct. And you are Marci Blackstone? You are the first American woman I have met."

"Let's go somewhere and talk. One of your people inside there wants my help and I want to assist him if I can."

"Gypsies are allowed entry into the United States?"

"He has a brother there. That will help."

She led the way across the street to a coffee house with padded booths and hanging plants. "You've been here before," Michael observed. "Do you visit the prison often?"

She sat down opposite him, crossed her long legs, and lit an American cigarette. "When there is a need for it. A few months ago, an American journalist was held overnight, accused of being a spy. Luckily I was able to gain his freedom before it became an international incident. I wish I could do the same for your Gypsies, but of course they are not Americans—I can visit them only as a friend."

"They had nothing to do with the bombing that killed Colonel Costache."

"Of course not," she agreed readily. "But it was a Gypsy cart and therefore in the eyes of the government all Gypsies are suspect."

"If the real bombers are revealed, the government will have to free the hostages."

The young woman hesitated, as if weighing her words. Sitting opposite her, Michael felt a warmth he'd never known before. "That is true," she said, "unless it was someone in the government who had him killed."

"How is that possible?"

"Look, I've probably said too much already."

"No, no—you must help me to help my people."

She brushed back her long brown hair with an impatient hand. She wanted to help the hostages, he knew that, or she wouldn't have been visiting them in the first place. "You understand that some of the information I have is classified. I can't be too specific. Our sources tell us a great deal of money is missing from certain government accounts. The killing of Costache could have been the removal of an embarrassing witness rather than an act of terrorism."

Michael was instantly alert. This young woman was making sense, and for the first time since his arrival in Bucharest he saw a possibility of helping the hostages. "You must tell me what you know," he begged.

She seemed to reach a decision. "Come with me to the American Embassy. I'll see what I can do. . ."

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Captain Segar had not been wasting his time since Michael left him to visit the hostages. He'd been speaking with the police who handled the initial investigation of the bombing, not really knowing what to expect.

One officer, a burly man named Yela, had helped him round up the ten hostages following the General's directive. It was Yela who told him, "The Gypsy cart that blew up was traced to a man named Mar Flando, who claimed he had sold it."

"Why wasn't he arrested?"

Yela shrugged. "I couldn't find him when I was bringing in hostages, so I arrested his brother instead. The older Flando has become something of a spokesman for the ten."

Captain Segar went in search of Mar Flando. It took him only two hours to locate him, at a Gypsy encampment outside the city. It made him wonder how hard Yela had really looked. "More questions?" the slender Gypsy asked after he identified himself. "Is it not enough that you arrest my brother?"

"The wagon that blew up—it was yours."

"I told them about that. It was sold last week."

"To whom?"

"A man named Argento. He builds highways."

"Why would he want a Gypsy cart?"

"I didn't ask him."

Segar left and drove back into downtown Bucharest. His next job was to locate the man named Argento.

The American Embassy in Bucharest was a two-story building of vaguely semi-Gothic design, located at 21 Soseaua Kiseleff. The Marine guard let Marci Blackstone through the gate with her visitor, and Michael followed her up the rose-marble steps and into the white embassy building. Another Marine at a desk kept an eye on a bank of closed-circuit television sets. He barely glanced up as Marci signed in for herself and Michael.

Her office was at the back of the second floor, a small room with walls lined with books and maps. "Where is your village, Michael?" she asked. He pointed it out on the map and she said, "Do you have a wife and family?"

He told her about Rosanna, who told fortunes with a deck of tarot cards and carved little wooden animals to sell at the village shops. "We had a child once," he continued. "A beautiful daughter. She died of diphtheria when she was five."

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"I'm so sorry. That must have been terrible for you."

"Yes," he admitted. "And for my wife. After that, I took a greater interest in village affairs. When our Gypsy King was crippled, I took over many of his duties."

"And now you travel about, helping your fellow Gypsies."

Michael smiled. "A sort of super-Gypsy? No—that belongs in one of your American comic books. I help people sometimes. Other times, perhaps, I hurt them unwittingly. I am only one more human being, no better or worse than any other."

"You're better than the one who blew up that cart and killed Costache. You're better than the General who imprisons helpless Gypsies." She got to her feet. "Excuse me for a moment."

She went through a connecting door into the next office, and Michael glanced around. A digital clock reminded him it was already late afternoon. A small framed photograph on the desk showed Marci with an older couple, probably her parents. There was some unopened mail at one corner of the desk, but otherwise the place was neat. He wondered if all Americans were as neat and businesslike as Marci Blackstone.

She returned with a thin folder, which she opened. "This is a confidential report based on information from certain informers. It shows that in the past two years perhaps three million lei have been illegally diverted from highway programs—that's around one hundred and eighty thousand American dollars. As you may know, the Russian government under Gorbachev has cracked down on official corruption and urged other nations in the Soviet bloc to do likewise."

"Who had access to the missing funds?"

"Any number of officials—but as Chief of Internal Affairs, Colonel Costache was in the best position to track down the guilty party. The highway money passed through his office and the records would be there."

"Any chance we could see them?" Michael asked.

"None. I'm lucky to have as much information as I do. Mind you, none of this proves a thing. The bombing still might be the work of terrorists. But at least there's another possibility."

Michael gazed into her pale-blue eyes. "I think you're holding something back. There is some reason for your favoring the one possibility over the other."

She smiled, and they might have been conspirators.

"There are a couple of things," she admitted. "Costache made dozens of public appearances each year because of his position in the

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government. Our background profile shows he occasionally used a stand-in for appearances where a speech was not necessary. The bombing occurred on the way to a speech at the Botanical Gardens. They knew it would be him and not a stand-in. A terrorist probably wouldn't have that information."

Michael shook his head. "That could have been pure chance. What else?"

She hesitated and then continued. "There is a local man named Argento. Not a native Romanian but a citizen nonetheless. Our embassy intelligence expert reports that Argento purchased a quantity of explosives recently. The purchase was made just three days after a directive from Moscow urging a crackdown on official corruption."

"Is there anything to link Argento with the government?"

"He often performed contract work for the Internal Affairs section. In fact, he did some of the highway work for which payments are now in question. The purchase of the explosives was supposedly for highway construction."

"Do you know where we might find Argento?" Michael asked. It was the best lead he'd come up with.

"He has a house in the suburbs and a small office at a gravel pit just outside the city."

"Let's try the office. Could you take me there?"

She nodded. "I'll get one of the embassy cars."

It was beginning to grow dark when they left the building and headed out of the city with home-bound workers. Marci had taken a small Russian-made car rather than one of the limousines. "Sometimes I get the feeling the big cars might be bugged," she told him. When he frowned at the last word, she explained. "You know—there might be listening devices hidden in them."

"Hidden by the Romanians or the Americans?"

She laughed. "Maybe both."

"Why are you helping me?" he asked seriously. "You hardly know me."

"The Gypsies have always been oppressed, driven from one country to another—exterminated along with the Jews in Hitler's death camps. They are your people and you want to help these ten hostages. I want to help them, too—the one who is going to America and the others as well. We have the same goal."

They drove on along Calea Grivitei as darkness settled over the city. . .

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Captain Segar couldn't understand what had happened to Michael. They had arranged to meet back at the hotel where Michael was staying, but he was not in his room. He brooded about it briefly, then went off to continue his personal investigation. During the course of the day, he'd confirmed that Costache's driver, the other victim of the bombing, had been completely loyal. No one who knew him believed for a moment that he could have betrayed the Colonel in any way. His dying words were proof of that.

As for the mysterious man named Argento, Segar had a lead on him. He did some business for the government, operating out of a gravel pit near the city. Segar was about to leave the government building and drive there when Major Istrase intercepted him.

"You have been asking questions," Istrase said.

"Of course. I understood that was my job."

"Your job is to find evidence against the Gypsies who murdered Colonel Costache, not to muddy the waters by going off in other directions."

"Is Argento another direction?"

"I do not know the man."

"I'm going to see him now," Segar said.

"That would not be wise."

Segar's eyes narrowed as he tried to gauge the Major's words. Was it a threat or merely advice? He started to walk past Istrase.

"The General's orders—"

Segar turned in growing anger. "Do you want the truth or not? I will not be a party to railroading innocent men!"

He walked on, not daring to look back. Istrase was wearing sidearms with his uniform and Segar would not have been surprised to hear the cocking of a pistol.

Marci Blackstone located the quarry road with some difficulty in the dark, and the car bumped along toward a small office building where lights still burned. "If he's not here, we'll try his house," she decided. "It's a bit late for him to be working."

"Someone's there," said Michael. "See the truck?"

They parked next to a red pickup truck and went up a few steps to the office door. No one answered Marci's knock but the door was unlocked and they went in. "Hello!" she called out. "Anyone here?"

Michael reached out to grasp her arm and hold her back. Through the open door he could see flies buzzing around a desk in the inner office. "Stay here," he said. "I'll look. . ."

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The man had been dead for several hours, the back of his head smashed in. Michael took a deep breath and called to Marci. "Do you know what Argento looks like?"

"I've seen a picture."

"I'm going to have to ask you to look."

She stepped into the office. "That's all right. I've seen dead men before."

"Is it Argento?"

"I think so."

Michael looked quickly through the few papers on top of the desk and opened the drawers without finding anything. There was an answering machine hooked up to the telephone and he rewound the tape to listen to the messages.

"Argento didn't bother to do it," he observed. "That means his killer probably arrived with him or was waiting for him. He had no time to check out his phone messages."

The first two were unimportant calls from a trucking company. The third and last voice was that of a young woman. "Mr. Argento, this is Trans-Charter Airlines. Your charter flight will be ready on schedule at our airstrip at ten-thirty this evening."

Michael glanced at the wall clock. "Where is Trans-Charter's airstrip?"

"Out near Otopeni Airport, about twenty-five miles north of the city."

"I think we'd better go there."

"Why? Argento won't be taking it."

"But someone else might."

They froze at the sound of the outer door opening. Marci looked past the open door. "It's an officer!" she whispered.

"I know him. Segar—in here!"

Captain Segar entered the inner office, seeing them with the body. "What's this?"

"Were you looking for Argento, too?"

Segar nodded. "Is this him?"

"She says it is. Miss Blackstone from the American Embassy."

Segar looked baffled. "Why did you both come here?"

"Argento bought some explosives," Michael told him.

"He also bought the Gypsy wagon that held them," said Segar.

"Then he did kill Costache," Marci said.

Michael nodded. "It would seem so. But whoever hired him wanted

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him silenced. Listen to this telephone message, Segar." He played the tape again. "We're going to the airstrip now."

Segar looked troubled. "It may not be that easy. I was followed here. Istrase warned me not to come and I believe he'll try to arrest me."

"You can come with us," Marci said. "They'll be watching for your car and think you're still here."

Segar climbed into the back seat, staying close to the floor. Marci again took the wheel, with Michael at her side. As they started out the gravel-pit road, Michael could see flares ahead.

"Damn," Marci said. "They've put up a roadblock and there's no other way out!"

"Segar might be able to get us through."

"He's the one they're looking for," she reminded Michael. "Hang on—we're going through."

"What?"

She pressed the accelerator to the floor and the car shot forward. It hit the wooden barricade with a crash, scattering the flares and sending uniformed men diving for cover. They were a quarter mile down the road before the first gunshots sounded ineffectively behind them.

Segar cautiously raised his head above the level of the seat. "Michael, this woman drives like a demon," he said. "Where did you find her?"

"I think she found me."

"Keep your heads low," Marci warned. "We may run into more of them."

"Why are we going to the airstrip if Argento is dead?" Segar asked Michael.

"That's what I asked him, too," Marci said. She turned sharply to avoid a Gypsy cart in the road ahead.

"I have an idea," Michael told them. "It's no more than that. Tell me something, Segar. In your investigation of the bombing, did you learn anything about the driver, Axel?"

"Only that he was intensely loyal to Costache."

"Yes." Michael nodded. "I suspected as much."

"What does that tell you?"

"It may tell us who paid Argento to set off that bomb."

They drove in silence for a time over rough back roads, avoiding

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the highways where police cars might easily spot them. Once Marci remarked, "This is the most excitement I've had since I came to Bucharest," but somehow Segar didn't believe her. She handled herself like someone who didn't mind danger. He wondered what her job at the American Embassy was and if the Americans ever used female CIA agents in their overseas embassies.

Finally, the lights of the large Otopeni Airport came into view. She circled around it to a smaller private airfield nearby. A large lighted sign announced the headquarters of Trans-Charter Airlines. "This is it."

Michael nodded. "With twenty minutes to spare. Come on."

Inside a small waiting room, he went immediately to the counter. "A charter flight leaving at ten-thirty, booked in the name of Argento?"

The clerk nodded. "I believe Mr. Argento is just boarding his plane."

Segar followed them as they ran for the door. A small executive jet sat on the runway with its passenger door still open. "Do you have your gun?" Michael asked Segar. "You may need it."

A man wearing dark glasses and a beard appeared in the doorway of the plane. "He's got a gun!" Marci shouted.

Segar dropped to the tarmac, pulling his own weapon free, but Michael was already at the steps, tackling the man around the ankles. They went down together as Marci managed to kick the weapon from the bearded man's hand.

"Who is it?" Segar asked when they had their prisoner under control.

"I've never met him," Michael said as he pulled off the false beard and glasses, "but I imagine we are looking at the face of Colonel Florian Costache, who is very much alive."

When Istrase led Segar and Michael into the General's office early the following morning, Oltenia was the first to speak from behind his black desk. "The hostages are being released at this hour," he announced. "Colonel Costache will receive a fair trial, although I must say my first reaction was to stand him before a firing squad without delay."

"Do you wish to tell us how you located him?" Major Istrase asked.

"Michael Vlado and I came at this from different directions," Captain Segar explained. "I learned that a man named Argento had purchased the Gypsy cart involved in the explosion, while Michael

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found out this same Argento had purchased explosives. He was a contractor sometimes employed by the government. Michael also learned there was a large discrepancy in official funds, pointing to corruption by a government official."

"Where did you learn all this?" Istrase demanded.

"From reliable sources," Michael answered. "Anyway, we went to question Argento and found him dead. But there was evidence of a chartered flight leaving last night. It would have flown Colonel Costache to safety in Italy. The money he'd embezzled is already in Swiss bank accounts—at least three million lei and probably more."

"How did you know he wasn't dead? And who died in his place?"

"It was the stand-in he sometimes used for official functions. The embezzled money raised the possibility that Costache had been killed to keep him from implicating someone in the government, but it was just as likely—more likely, given his position as Chief of Internal Affairs—that Costache himself had taken the money. Remember his driver's dying words? 'Take care of the Colonel.' It's difficult to know exactly how a man's mind might be functioning at the moment of death, but the faithful Axel, aware of the force of the explosion, probably realized the man in the car with him was beyond help. He was trying to tell you to guard the real Colonel Costache from another attempt on his life—he would have known the man in the car was the stand-in."

"But I helped the Colonel dress!" Istrase protested. "I was with him in his office!"

"I imagine you left him alone when the limousine arrived. That was when Costache made the switch and sent his stand-in out to die in his place. The stand-in was only used when there were no speeches. To have sent him to the Botanical Gardens, where there would be a speech, proved that the real Costache knew the car would never arrive. He made up some excuse for sending the stand-in, probably telling him of an important last-minute meeting and promising to arrive in time for the speech. Then he arranged for Argento to trigger the blast as the car passed the Gypsy cart. The stand-in and the faithful Axel were killed, and Costache was free to fly off and join his money. He'd been hiding at the gravel pit since the explosion, and he removed Argento from the scene before he left to catch the plane. It was to be a perfect escape. Even if someone questioned the stand-in's absence at some future time, no one would be certain who really died—and Costache would be far away."

"All supposition," the General complained. "You had no proof."

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"Not until we found Costache on that plane. Then we had all the proof we needed."

Marci Blackstone was waiting downstairs when they left the building. She was wearing a skirt and sweater now, with the same high heels. "I just wanted to say goodbye," she told Michael. "Have a safe journey home."

He smiled at her. "I will. I'm driving back with Captain Segar. I can never thank you enough for all your help."

"If I'm ever near Gravita I'll come to see you."

"Anyone there can direct you to my farm."

She shook hands firmly with Captain Segar and waited until they drove off. Segar saw her waving goodbye as their car turned the corner. Michael Vlado was in good spirits all the way home.

DETECTIVERSE

THE STING

by MARY E. DURHAM

The traitor was "trading" when caught.
The secrets he peddled were hot.
They wined him and dined him
And then they confined him—
So now like as not he'll be shot.

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a *NEW* short story by

ANN BAYER

"Ed? Wrong? Surely my ears deceive me. How is it possible for the master of the narrative hook, the genius of denouement, to be—"

"Oh, shut up," said Roberta. She lowered the book. "Face it. You're not a writer. You're an editor. That's all you are and all you'll ever be. Ed and I are the writers around here. Go to bed."

Another brief story of sweet revenge from Ann Bayer, a writer at Life *magazine and an O. Henry Award-winning author.*

Speaking of awards . . .

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

by ANN BAYER

It was after dinner. We three—my wife, Ed, and I—were in the living room. Ed appeared to be in a postprandial torpor. I was sitting at the desk going over a manuscript on the evolutionary sequence of elliptical galaxies. (I'm an editor at *Universe Monthly*.) My wife was lying on the couch reading a mystery short story. Mine.

My one ambition in life has always been to get a mystery story published. For years I've spent all my free time banging away at the typewriter. Until that evening I'd never dared show my work to anyone, least of all my wife. But at last I'd written a story I was proud of. I wanted her to read it before I sent it to a magazine. I hoped that when she saw how wonderfully I wrote, she'd stop being in love with Ed and resume being in love with me. I'd presented it to her with a flourish ten minutes earlier. Ten minutes of silence followed. Then I heard her utter a single word. "Ugh."

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I stared down at the paragraph I had been editing. It ended in a widow, an incomplete line at the top of the page. I took a pencil and deleted the widow. I would have preferred deleting my wife. Instead I looked up and smiled. "Did you say something, darling?"

"I just finished your story. It's lousy."

"Oh? What exactly didn't you—"

"In fact, it's the worst story I've ever read. You can't even think up a decent title. 'The Case of the Poisoned Pecans.' I mean, give me a break."

"I thought it had a kind of alliterative ring."

"Alliterative? The title gives away all the suspense. The moment the drama teacher reaches into that bowl of nuts, the reader knows she's going to start clutching her stomach in agony. And I can't understand why you had to drag religion into it by making the drama teacher's daughter a minister."

"But, darling," I said, "I was trying to be original. People usually think of a minister as being a—"

"And the judge character. What did you call him? Bub. No judge is called Bub."

"But isn't that the sort of affectionate nickname people down South—"

"That's another thing. God knows what made you set the story in Alabama. You're a New Yorker. You've never even set foot outside of Manhattan."

"Okay, okay. I guess I'm just not as brilliant and talented as you are. Or Ed is." I glared at Ed, whose mind was obviously elsewhere.

"I'll say you're not," said my wife. She tossed the story on the floor. "You couldn't write your way out of a paper bag."

My wife is—was—the mystery writer Roberta Montgomery. Her biggest blockbuster, you'll remember, was *Caught Red-Handed.* That book alone made enough dough for us to buy a duplex on Central Park South. It was also what brought Ed into our lives. Ed was—is—another mystery writer even more famous than Roberta. A year after *Caught Red-Handed* was published to rave reviews, Ed moved in with us. Suddenly I found myself part of a ménage à trois. My wife made no secret about which of us she liked better. She kept telling everyone how inspiring it was to have Ed around. She called him her muse. She said he had the most charming moustache she'd ever seen.

That evening, after Roberta had flounced upstairs to bed, I kept

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Ed company in the living room. As usual he seemed to be in some kind of literary fog. I went and sat on the couch and retrieved my story from the floor. I noticed Roberta had taken the liberty of marking it up with a pen. I inspected her handiwork. All my favorite sentences had been X'ed out. Most of the others had been circled. Each circle sprouted an arrow extending into the margin where my wife had scribbled such constructive criticisms as "inept!!," "gobbledygook!," and "trite!!!!" I sat there and reread my story through from beginning to end. By the time I finished, I realized that my wife was right. The story *was* lousy. In fact, "The Case of the Poisoned Pecans" was unpublishable.

Then again, maybe it wasn't unpublishable. Something had attracted my attention. Ed. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. As I did so, a plan began to form in my brain. "Ed," I asked him, "want to be my accomplice?"

When I walked into our bedroom that night, Roberta was propped against the pillows reading a book. The title had something to do with a morgue. It was one of Ed's mysteries. This was not unusual. She read and reread his work. She claimed she learned something new each time. I sat down on the bed, keeping one hand behind my back.

"How's the book?" I asked.

"Fascinating." She didn't bother to look up.

"Speaking of Ed, darling, just now downstairs I had him read 'The Case of the Poisoned Pecans.' He thought it was great."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"No, really. He said it's one of the best short stories he's ever read. He said he's sure I can get it published. He said any magazine would be honored to publish it."

Roberta turned a page. "Yeah? Well, he's wrong."

"Ed? Wrong? Surely my ears deceive me. How is it possible for the master of the narrative hook, the genius of denouement, to be—"

"Oh, shut up," said my wife. She lowered the book. "Face it. You're not a writer. You're an editor. That's all you are and all you'll ever be. Ed and I are the writers around here. Go to bed."

"Damn it," I shouted, "how dare you speak to me like that? Stop comparing me unfavorably to Ed. I mean it, Roberta. No more."

She leered at me. "Ever?"

"Never."

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In a booming voice she declaimed, "Quoth the husband, 'Nevermore!' "

That did it. At last I was angry enough to kill. I swung my arm from behind my back and smashed the blunt instrument I was holding into my wife's skull. There was a muffled thwack as porcelain met cranium. Slowly Roberta's face took on the same glazed expression Ed's always had. Good old Ed, I thought. I smiled down at the ceramic statuette of Edgar Allan Poe, now bloodstained, that the Mystery Writers of America had awarded my wife after proclaiming *Caught Red-Handed* the best novel of the year. The statuette was called an Edgar—Ed for short.

After a moment I stood up, yanked back the bedclothes, and worked my arms under Roberta's body. It took all my strength to hoist her off the bed. I lurched to the stairs and let her roll out of my arms. She hit the landing headfirst. I watched her somersault the rest of the way to the bottom, where she lay sprawled face-down.

Then I took Ed into the upstairs bathroom and thrust him under the tap. The blood washed right off. He had come through the experience unscathed except for a slight crack along one side of the nose. I carried Ed downstairs, sidestepped the body, and returned him to his usual place on the coffee table. Then I went to the phone and dialed 911.

"Operator," I said, "emergency—my wife—she—I. Send an ambulance—hurry—" I sobbed out the address.

There was no inquest. The medical examiner attributed the cause of death to a skull fracture sustained during an accidental fall down a flight of stairs.

After the funeral I made my way through the crowd—composed mostly of mystery buffs—until I found Roberta's longtime literary agent, Heather Green.

She threw her arms around me. "You poor man. I still can't believe Roberta's gone."

"Neither can I. Listen, Heather, there's something I want to talk to you about. Roberta had just completed a manuscript when I—when she—"

"Yes, I know—the last time we talked she said the novel was practically finished. Thank God we can all curl up with one last Roberta Montgomery. When can I see it?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. It isn't actually a novel. It's a short story."

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"But it can't be! Roberta told me the manuscript was over three hundred pages."

"I'm afraid she was putting you on."

"I don't—it's all so—"

"Personally, I think it's the best thing she's ever done. But then I was her husband, so obviously I'm biased."

I got Heather to agree to read the story, and the following day I dropped off "The Case of the Poisoned Pecans" at her office. That evening she called me.

"So what do you think?" I asked her.

"It's very—unlike Roberta."

"Yes," I said, "it's a real departure. Think of what guts it took for Roberta to go off in a whole new—"

"And I'm mystified about something," said Heather. "How come there are all these margin notes?"

"I *knew* I should have retyped the story and given you a clean copy. Those are just some little suggestions Roberta wrote to herself. They're in her handwriting. You can have it authenticated if you like."

"But why would she write things like 'hackneyed' exclamation point and 'vile' three exclamation points all over her own work?"

I sighed. "Roberta was always her own severest critic. Nothing she wrote was ever good enough. She was forever crossing things out and revising and—"

"Well, if she hated the story, I don't think it's right to send it out."

"But Roberta *didn't* hate it—she loved it. Only minutes before she fell down the stairs, she told me the story was finally just the way she wanted it. Her last wish was that it should be published exactly as is."

"But where? It's so—un-Roberta Montgomery-ish. Who would want to buy it?"

"It's a mystery story, Heather," I said. "Send it to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*"

EQMM turned it down. The editor wrote to Heather saying that although she had long been an avid fan of Roberta Montgomery, she believed "The Case of the Poisoned Pecans" to have been written by an impostor.

When Heather telephoned to tell me this, I was incredulous. "An impostor? What nerve!" I said. "Well, forget about *Ellery Queen.*

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Send it somewhere else. I know, make it a multiple submission. Send it to every magazine that publishes short stories."

"Do you have any idea what the postage—"

"Please, Heather," I said. "Don't talk to me of stamps. Roberta was my wife and your most lucrative client. Show some respect."

In all, Heather mailed the story to twenty-three magazines. She got back twenty-three rejections. I even had her send it to Roberta's book publisher to see if they'd like to bring it out in a limited edition. They wouldn't.

Finally, Heather called me at work to say there was nothing more she could do. The story had been everywhere. After we hung up, I sat motionless for an hour. I was overwhelmed with despair. Then I roused myself to go to the men's room—where I ran into my editor-in-chief and suddenly had a brainstorm. There was one last magazine that Heather hadn't tried. While I was washing my hands, I told the editor-in-chief what I had in mind.

"Look," he said, "I sympathize. Naturally you want your wife's last manuscript to be published. But we don't do fiction. All we do is astronomy. We're an astrophysics journal."

"I know that, but couldn't we alter our policy this one time?"

"I'm afraid not. It just wouldn't—oh, for God's sake, here, dry your eyes." He handed me a paper towel. "Tell you what, if it means that much to you, I suppose we could make an exception this once. But I have to warn you, we can't afford to pay anything for it."

"Not—anything?"

"No."

"Okay, boss," I said. "You know I couldn't care less about the financial aspect. But, listen, what about billing the story on the cover? Something like—'A Strychnine-Laced Chiller by the Late Great Roberta Montgomery'?"

"No. No fanfare. We simply print the story. Take it or leave it."

Several issues later, "Poisoned Pecans" appeared in *Universe Monthly*. So what if it went unheralded on the cover? So what if it was way in the back, sandwiched between articles on galactic nebulae and interstellar dynamics? I had achieved my ambition. I was a published mystery writer.

Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. A few months went by. Then one day I got a letter from the Mystery Writers of America. "The Case of the Poisoned Pecans" had been nominated for best short story of the year.

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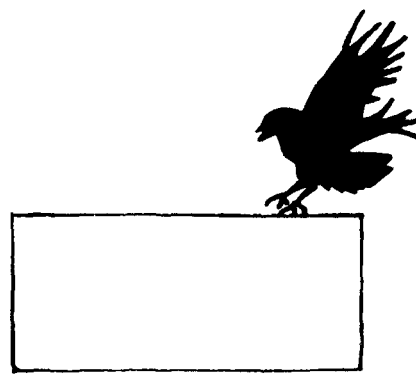
I attended their annual Awards Dinner. The story won, of course. I went to the podium and accepted the posthumous Edgar on Roberta's behalf.

When I got home that night, I placed the Edgar on the coffee table next to Ed. Except for Ed's facial scar, the two were identical.



DETECTIVERSE

SOME YEAST

by JEAN DOBBS

The prosecuting attorney said,
"This case is crystal clear—
She killed her spouse for his life insurance
By serving him poisoned beer."
The baker's wife hung her head in shame.
"Guilty," she conceded.
"For my gambling debts, I needed the dough
He made from the dough he kneaded."

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Max found a pen and began to write. Oleander may not be an old flame but she was an old friend. If he felt like waving as their ships passed on this unexpected course, why not do it?

"We only live once, you told me years ago," he wrote, "so I can't let this opportunity slip by. Are you the Oleander Braine who attended London Poly when I did? I hope it is you and that you are well. My parents both passed away and I'm living in the old house in Tooting Bec. Doing fine. Making some extra cash stuffing envelopes for an old friend of me dad. Which is where I came across your address. I shall scribble mine at the bottom in case you feel like responding. If not, fare well, old jazz buddy . . ."

WE ONLY LIVE ONCE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Take a leaflet. A coupon. A reply card. Put them with a sales letter. Stuff the lot into a window-envelope so that the addressee's name shows through. Set it aside and start another.

Max Carpenter found it restful, selecting materials from stacks on the dining-room table, collating them, and inserting them into envelopes. While he worked, he listened to recorded music. Now that his mother was dead and he had the house to himself, he could play whatever he liked. At the moment, he was listening to the Benny Goodman Sextet.

Up in Seymour Selwyn's Chelsea apartment, which smelled of fried food and Seymour, Seymour had asked him, "Are you sure you want to take on such boring work?" Max had been shown the boxes of material and what went where. It was a mailing campaign on

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behalf of *Selwyn's London Stage Review*. Comprising the old ham's collection of programs, photographs, and other memorabilia, the ten volumes at fifteen quid each were value for money. "I could send you out to do research at the library."

"I'd rather work at home," Max said. He felt fortunate in discovering this cottage industry. He could use the money. His expenses had gone up after his mother Lily died. For years, they shared the house in South London, living modestly off the income from investments made by Morgan Carpenter before he fell from Blackfriar's Bridge and drowned in the Thames. It was Max's belief that his father jumped, weighted down by depression and alcohol. The old man's life as an actor had been dramatic and it needed a spectacular curtain.

After the funeral, his widow never went outside again. Max gave up his job behind a department-store counter and began staying home to keep her company. They wore out six decks of cards playing rummy and solitaire. Then his mother succumbed to a heart attack and Max, aged 34, was alone.

Not tragically alone but alone in an independent way. The only problem was outgoings exceeding income, since Max now visited the pub on a daily basis, went to the cinema twice a week, and dined out frequently at the local curry house. Besides the investments, he had five thousand on deposit at Natwest. Hence his relief when the old stage colleague of his father's asked for help with his mailings.

"Where do you get all these names?" Max inquired when first he saw the hundreds of labels to be peeled off sheets and stuck on the duplicated letters. Each bore a name and address, many in London but some in towns throughout England.

"I subscribe to a service," Selwyn explained. "They gather names by advertising free catalogues on a variety of subjects. I buy the lists from them."

At home now, with Goodman's clarinet leading Wilson's piano a merry chase, Max went through the motions of labeling, collating, stuffing, and sealing. Then, a certain label stopped him cold.

"Oleander Braine," he murmured.

There could hardly be two women with such an uncommon name. Max remembered her from classes at Central London Polytechnic. He had attended for a year before deciding the life of a school teacher was not for him. Oleander Braine—here she was, listed at an address in the city of Bath, in Somerset. She had not been pretty in the classic sense, her nose too large, one eye slightly crossed, but she

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had immense charm. There was always a swagger of young men around her and Max was one of them.

Now he inserted her sales letter and the accompanying literature into an envelope. But before moistening and sealing the gummed flap, he paused and allowed his mind to dwell on exciting times at the Poly. Oleander hadn't been afraid of taking chances. Her influence on Max could be profound. He remembered an afternoon when an important lecture was scheduled there was also a concert by Oscar Peterson at Ronnie Scott's Soho jazz club not far away. Max, over cafeteria lunch, had extolled the virtues of the visiting Canadian.

Later Oleander cornered him in the corridor outside the lecture hall. "Is this bloke worth listening to, then?"

"He's one of a kind."

"Come along," she said, linking her arm through his. "You only live once."

This was almost fifteen years ago. She had enjoyed the music. They ate sandwiches and drank a fair amount of beer and he walked her back to her digs in the late evening, and believed ever since that they might have made love had he been confident enough to expect it.

Now Max drew a blank sheet of paper from a drawer, found a pen, and began to write. Oleander may not be an old flame but she was an old friend. If he felt like waving as their ships passed on this unexpected course, why not do it?

"We only live once, you told me years ago," he wrote, "so I can't let this opportunity slip by. Are you the Oleander Braine who attended London Poly when I did? I hope it is you and that you are well. My parents both passed away and I'm living in the old house in Tooting Bec. Doing fine. Making some extra cash stuffing envelopes for an old friend of me dad. Which is where I came across your address. I shall scribble mine at the bottom in case you feel like responding. If not, fare well, old jazz buddy."

He wrote his signature, then printed his name in case she had trouble deciphering the scrawl. With the note inside, he sealed the envelope and tossed it on the stack. It was like a shipwrecked mariner, he thought, flinging a message in a bottle into the sea.

When, after three weeks, there had been no reply, Max held one of his solitary conversations. Early on a Saturday afternoon, he was busy with the continuing job of getting rid of his mother's clothes.

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Before Lily Carpenter became a recluse, she had been a gadabout. Every closet in the house was packed with garments, most of them purchased, used, from charity shops. On weekends, before television sports coverage began, he filled a couple of supermarket plastic bags with cardigans, vests, tweed slacks, saris, and designer blouses, and carried them to the Red Cross shop on the high street.

His mind was on Oleander Braine as he lifted clothing from hangers. "Why didn't she respond?"

"Wrong girl."

"Two with a name like that?"

"Anything is possible."

"Even a stranger ought to drop a line. Wouldn't she be curious about her namesake?"

"She's suspicious. You could be some sort of con artist."

Max grabbed up two loaded bags and left the apartment. "I think it's her. She's being shy."

"Then write her again."

He did write again, a longer letter covering the same ground. He wrote out his own envelope this time, glad that he had bothered to copy down her address from Seymour's list.

A reply arrived within the week. The letter said, "Of course I remember you. But you must not pursue the relationship. I'm in different circumstances now and ask you to respect my privacy."

Far from being put off by her rejection, Max could hardly think of anything else. In this most peculiar way, he had come across the name of an attractive girl he had known fifteen years ago. There was no mistake, it was she. He was carrying her letter in his breast pocket next to his heart. He imagined he could feel warmth from it through his shirt. Oleander Braine was alive and well and living at 92 Archer Court in Bath, Somerset.

Alive, but perhaps not well. What could the different circumstances be? Not marriage, because her maiden name was on the list. Unless she was one of these modern militants who marry and retain their original name. Or maybe she was divorced and had gone back to using Braine.

Seymour was taking delivery of a thousand letters, paying Max in cash. "You have no reason to be ashamed of what you're doing, you know."

"I'm not."

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"Your father used to say, 'There are no small roles, only small actors.' "

"That's a good philosophy," Max said.

"I was jealous of Carpenter when he married your mother. My dream was to possess Lily myself."

Max couldn't imagine Selwyn dreaming of anything but photograph albums. He helped his employer carry the boxes of letters to his car. "I may not be available for a few days next week," Max said. "I plan to go out of town."

"Funny time of year for a holiday." It was early October.

"A friend has asked me to come visit," Max explained.

On Tuesday of the following week, Max took the Underground to Paddington, walked across to the mainline station, and bought a return ticket for Bath. His mind was occupied almost constantly by a particular vision of Oleander. They were in Ronnie Scott's, listening to Peterson. The pianist was in full flight and Max was leaning forward, drawn by the music. He turned to catch Oleander's reaction and found she was watching him. Her face was composed in a satisfied smile.

Max's journey on the high-speed train was over almost before it began. After miles of green countryside, he saw terraced buildings of blackened stone, saw the placid Avon, was at his destination a little over an hour after leaving London.

It was eleven-thirty in the morning and the pubs weren't crowded. Max took the opportunity to eat a sandwich and drink enough beer to quell inhibitions. An inner voice was asking him how he could possibly intrude on a person who had practically ordered him to stay away. But with two pints of lager aboard, his view was altered. Having arrived in town on a casual visit, it seemed proper that he ring through and say hello to an old school chum.

He would make telephone contact and then play it by ear. Oleander might even ask him round for coffee. There was a call box on a side street near the pub. Max found Braine in the directory, listed at the Archer Court address. He put in ten pence, dialed, and listened to the rings. A woman's voice came on the line, sounding wary.

"May I speak to Oleander, please?"

"Who's this?"

"Max Carpenter. An old friend of hers from the London Poly. I included a note in—"

"Oh, it's you. She isn't here."

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"When will she be back?"

"Couldn't say."

"May I come round and wait for her? I'm only in town for the day."

"No, you may not. I thought she made that clear. Didn't you get her letter?"

"Yes, but I happened to be in Bath and—"

The telephone was put down at the other end. Max went back inside the pub, asked for another pint, and carried it to a small round table. Something was not right in the county of Somerset. Not only was Oleander unwilling to see him—

Wait a minute—it was not Oleander. This other woman was doing all the talking. Max had no way of knowing what Oleander might have said.

Lights kept coming on inside his head until Max's imagination was open for business. The off-putting letter was probably the work of the telephone watchdog—it *had* seemed very un-Oleanderish to Max when he read it. So what was going on? Why was it vital that an old school chum be discouraged from corresponding and then kept from the front door?

His glass was empty. Max went to the bar and had it refilled. That was where the suspicion hit home like a wave pounding the beach in a force-eight gale. Oleander was dead. And this woman, for some reason, did not want to say so.

When the pub closed after three o'clock, Max asked directions to Archer Court. The bartender took him outside and showed him the way, holding his arm and pointing as if he would be traveling into another country.

Max walked narrow pavements winding upward, emerging at one point with a breathtaking view of the Royal Crescent across an acre of grass.

Archer Court was in a warren of streets a mile away, Number 92 being located on the corner. This was convenient—Max was able to keep an eye on the door while lurking near a bus stop on the adjoining street.

He was beginning to sober up, and the sun was going down at half past four. The balmy autumn afternoon was becoming a chilly evening. What was he up to, anyway? There was no real reason to suspect Oleander was dead. She had written him a letter telling him she didn't want to be his pen-pal. Fair enough. There could be any number of reasons for that. The woman on the telephone had been

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standoffish, but so what? She and Oleander shared a residence, shared a life, and they had no room in either for a Max Carpenter from the old days. At intervals of one hour, trains were departing Bath for Paddington. How simple it would be, how decomplicating, for him to walk to the station and present his return ticket.

The door of Number 92 opened. At first he thought it was Oleander stepping through, a scarf tied over her head, the strap of her handbag slung across a shoulder. She was wearing the imitation-leopardskin coat that had looked so distinctive back in London Poly days.

When the woman approached, heading for the shops on the main street, Max saw that it wasn't Oleander, after all. But she was similar in build and bore a facial resemblance. He would have bet anything that she was carrying Oleander's identification in that tacky bag.

His heart was pounding as the woman turned the corner. He began following her at a distance of twenty yards. There was no doubt in his mind now—Oleander was dead, her body buried in the back garden. Here was her killer, wearing Oleander's clothes, using whatever assets the poor girl had possessed. He was secure about following her—she knew his voice but not his appearance.

As the woman paid visits to a couple of shops, Max waited outside. Then she hurried on for several streets, ending up at a drab building housing the offices of the Department of Health and Social Security. Of course! She would not have reported her victim's death. If Oleander had been on the dole, there would be a check for her here every other week. The woman could claim it easily with Oleander's cards.

When she reappeared, Max followed her home. Reasoning that she might not answer the door to his ring later, he came up to her while she was getting out her key. "I telephoned earlier," he said. "What's happened to Oleander Braine?"

She put it together. "You're nothing if not persistent." She narrowed her eyes and then smiled at him. It was a look Max had seen before. It conveyed curiosity over what any woman might find attractive in him. "Are you an old sweetheart?"

"We went to school together."

Her expression softened further. "Would you like a cup of tea? I'm Fanny Paxton. Oleander's sister."

It explained the resemblance. And a sister could wear a sister's coat. His imagination had made much out of little. "Thanks," he said. "I could use a cuppa."

The house was sparsely furnished. Max thought it looked as if

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articles were being sold off. Fanny saw the expression on his face. "What is it they say?" she said. "I was not always as you see me now."

They were in the kitchen and she was putting on the kettle. Max placed himself at a long pine table. She was saying, "The Braine sisters are not lucky with their men. The one I married had the grace to die. His insurance helps me more than he ever did."

Fanny Paxton made Max nervous. She had a glitter in her eyes that he imagined could turn quickly to rage. He accepted the cup of tea. "Shall I tell you what's going on?" She was looking at him with a calculating expression. "Why not? Maybe you can be useful when you know the story."

Oleander's husband, she explained, was an up-and-coming young lawyer named Jeremy Milbank. They had met and married in London but were now living apart. The only enduring product of the union was a son, Patrick, now nine years old. One of these notorious tug-of-love situations had developed. Until recently, the boy had been living with Oleander at the house in Bath. Then, on one of his periodic visits to his father, he had failed to return. Jeremy was insisting Patrick was where he wanted to be. Furthermore, detectives were putting together a dossier to prove in court that Oleander was an unfit mother.

"Can he make it stick?"

"Yes. Not because it's true but because he's a lawyer and the magistrates are his friends."

By this time, Max was wishing he'd never made the trip. "What do you work at?" Fanny asked him as she refilled his cup.

"I have a part-time job," he said, "for a man who circulates theatrical publications."

"It must pay well. Day-trips in the middle of the week."

"Supplementary income, really. My mother inherited from my father. And when she died, it came to me."

"Very nice," Fanny said. "And only right. I'm sure you were their pride and joy."

He glanced at his watch. "I suppose I'd better be making a move. I've got a train ride ahead of me."

Fanny shook her head. "You ought to stick around."

"I may get back someday."

"I'd ask you to stay here, but a strange man in the house and detectives watching—"

"It's all right. I have my return ticket."

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"Oleander will kick me if she arrives back and learns I let you go. The poor girl has little enough joy these days."

Despite his earlier reluctance, Max was experiencing the gratification of being wanted. "I don't know where I'd get a room."

"There's a nice bed-and-breakfast ten minutes from here." Fanny went to the telephone. "I'll call the landlady and see if she can fix you up."

The rooming house was down the hill above a fish-and-chip shop. Max paid in advance, climbed a flight of creaking stairs, and let himself in. Switching on the electric fire against the chill, he sat on the bed and wondered about what he was doing. Fanny Paxton had become friendly and persuasive all of a sudden. From refusing to see him, she had gone so far as to ask him to stay the night. The invitation included dinner of a sort—Max was to bring fish and chips with him when he went back in an hour.

And still he had not laid eyes on Oleander. Suspicion that something was not right arose in him again. Fanny had the power of an evangelist to shape his thinking when he was with her. But away by himself, he imagined again that there had been foul play. Oleander was supposed to appear tomorrow. But if she remained absent, Fanny could simply tell him her sister had changed her plans. The entire story about the estranged husband and the fought-over son could be fiction, invented to cover murder.

At seven o'clock, he showed up at the house in Archer Court, bearing the warm parcel exuding its aroma of vinegar and deep-fried batter. When Fanny opened the door, her face told Max she was in trouble. But she looked powerful, too. And dangerous.

"You're just in time to meet Oleander's nearest and dearest," she said. She closed the door and ushered Max into the living room. A tall man in a dark suit, white shirt, and regimental tie stood by the window. He had a handsome, threatening face. Closer to the doorway was a beefy man in a tweed jacket too small for him. Close-cropped, sandy hair emphasized a head like a mace.

"This is Mr. Carpenter," Fanny said, "a college mate of Oleander's. He's gone to a lot of trouble to look her up."

Max realized with dismay that he was being put forward as some sort of protector. Nor could he believe that he seemed to be taking on the role. He shook hands when introduced to Jeremy Milbank and to the thug, whose name was Scott.

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Milbank said, "I don't like wasting time. Oleander has stolen Patrick."

"She took him back," Fanny said. "He's her son."

"The courts have ruled on that. The boy belongs with me. We're waiting for the permanent disposition. In the meantime, I generously allowed visiting rights and this is how she repays me."

Milbank had a thin voice and he spoke in a pedantic tone that got up Max's nose. He said, "I wouldn't think generosity plays any part in your dealings."

"Are you my wife's new lover? The reports I've seen describe another type entirely."

Fanny said, "She's not here, Jeremy. Why don't you sod off. And take your pit-bull with you."

"I'll have the boy back in the end. Where can she go with him? It's only postponing the inevitable."

"I haven't seen a genuine bully in years," Max said. "Not since the schoolyard."

Scott moved in Max's direction, walked against him, chested him back, stepping on the toes of his shoes. The lawyer called him off. "None of that in here. This crafty lady would love to have reason to call the police." He came to Max. "You look a reasonable man. Don't be drawn into something that doesn't concern you."

Fanny said, "Why don't the pair of you vanish so my friend and I can have our supper."

"Seems a lot for two," Milbank said, eyeing the parcel. "Sure you aren't expecting company?" On the way out, he confronted Fanny at close range. "Give up," he said. "The place is watched. As soon as she tries to bring the lad here, I'll have him."

Max's hands were still trembling when Fanny passed him a plate of warmed-up fish and chips half an hour after the men were gone. She gave him a reassuring smile. "You were marvelous. You told him a thing or two. I'm so glad you were here. Jeremy quite easily has his way with me."

The telephone rang. Fanny answered and took up what sounded like the resumption of an earlier conversation. "They've been and gone. He's here now. No problem. No, don't come here, not with Patrick. They'll have a man watching." She listened, fingering slabs of fish into her mouth, eyes watching Max through a filter. "Yes, I'll put him on." She extended the telephone. "It's Oleander. She got back early."

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This, without the tribulations, was Max's reason for making the trip. "It's been a long time," he said.

Her voice was exactly as he remembered it. "You're being a wonderful friend, Max. How fortunate for me you came along just now."

"I haven't done anything."

"Do you believe in Fate? I do. I was wondering how I could possibly handle this mess. I knew something would happen, only I didn't know what. And here you are."

"I'm sorry about your son. Milbank seems a nasty piece of work."

"I have no chance if I fight him within the system. He's a lawyer, he knows the law. Even if I had the money to hire one of my own, they stick together."

"I'm sorry."

There was silence on the line. "You sound so sweet, Max. Do you remember taking off that afternoon to listen to jazz?"

"I think about it quite a lot."

"Are you still shy?"

"*I'm not sure shy is the word. At my age.*"

"Have a heart, love. We're not that old." She shifted gears, resuming a businesslike tone. "There might be another way I could keep Patrick."

"How?"

"It would take some money. Not a lot, but I don't have *any*."

"Tell me."

"I could fly to Spain. Take Patrick with me. Change my name, find work. Jeremy would never find us."

It sounded flimsy to Max. Jeremy Milbank, with detectives working for him, could track down his wife and son if he wanted to. But maybe he wouldn't want to go that far. Anyway, it would give her time. "How much money?" he asked. "I can lay my hands on a few thousand."

She brought young Patrick to the rooming house to hide him. He was a well dressed nine-year-old with a crafty look in his eyes. He wanted to go to sleep, which was all right with Max—it gave him a chance to talk to Oleander. They went downstairs and walked in a direction away from where she lived.

Oleander linked her hands through his arm and walked with her head on his shoulder. Her hair needed washing. But she still looked good, the extra weight suiting her sensuous face. "What a hero," she told him. "What a breath of freedom."

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"I'm glad to be able to help," Max said, feeling of two minds.

They went into a pub, where she insisted on paying for the drinks. Toasting him solemnly, she swallowed some gin with her eyes upraised, as if it was water in the desert. "I'll pay you back," she said. "Your money is just a loan."

"I'm not doing anything with it." True enough. The main portion of his mother's estate was in a long-term fund paying maximum interest. The five thousand in his deposit account at Natwest he had been saving for what he'd thought might be an extended holiday in America.

"How soon can you get it?" she asked. "I'm not sure how long we can hide Patrick from Jeremy."

Max was carrying plenty of identification. And he was on excellent terms with his bank manager. He could go into a local branch in the morning, ask them to telephone London, and have the cash by midday. He told her what he could do.

She kissed him. "As soon as we're established in Spain, you'll come and visit, stay as long as you like." She pressed her lips against the palm of his hand. "We'll have such good times!"

That night, Max slept on a settee under the window, leaving Patrick tucked up in bed. In the morning, the boy seemed to have no trouble lying in. He gave his benefactor one eye and a mumble at nine o'clock. Max shaved in the bathroom down the hall, using a disposable razor purchased at a food store. Then, dressed in yesterday's clothes, he hurried out to meet Oleander, as arranged, for breakfast at the corner cafe.

"I can only manage coffee," she said. She looked pale and frantic. "I hardly slept. I'm scared of running into my husband and that bastard he hired to protect him. Can we get to the bank, please?"

Max wolfed his toast and jam. "The lad slept well."

"Did he? Good. He sleeps through earthquakes."

The bank official was formal at first, but Max was good with people in offices. When he finished a breezy chat on the telephone with his manager in London, the business was conducted quickly. As the money was being organized and counted out in hundreds, Max took each stack and thumbed through it. The new notes were crisp and clean. He watched the teller making notations as she did the job.

Why not cap the morning by taking Oleander for lunch at some good restaurant? A bottle or two of wine, Patrick placed in Fanny's

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care for the afternoon, and who could say? He might at last achieve the pleasure with his London Poly classmate that should have been theirs all those years ago.

She was waiting outside the bank. He handed her the bulky envelope. She tucked it into her handbag, looking this way and that. "Don't worry about Jeremy," he said. "He's not liable to attack us in the street."

"You don't know him."

Max said, "Where to? Can I tempt you with an aperitif at The Woodman and then a bit of lunch?"

"I'd love it. First let me go and make arrangements for the tickets to Spain. You go back to the room and keep an eye on Patrick. I'll join you there in an hour."

"I thought we might farm him out with your sister. So that later we could—"

She kissed him on the lips. "I was going to suggest that very thing."

He watched her down the street and around the corner. Then he went back to the rooming house and mounted the steps two at a time. What a beautiful turn his life had taken. A couple of days ago, he was a lonely man in London, stuffing envelopes for extra money, and nothing worth doing with the money he already had. Now he was in another town, involved in a risky situation with real people.

Letting himself into the room, he found the boy up and dressed, sitting on the window ledge, staring into the street. He gave Max the wide-eyed look. "Please, sir. What time is it?"

"Half past eleven."

"Can I stop being Patrick now?"

"Beg pardon?"

"The lady gave my mum twenty quid to borrow me for one night. To pretend I was this Patrick. She said I'd be home by lunch."

Max wanted nothing more than to appear competent in front of this cheerful lad. "Do you know your way home?"

"Yes. It isn't far."

"Then you'd better be off, hadn't you."

Max's first stop was the bank, where he had a brief chat with the teller. Then he headed on up the hill at a run. He arrived out of breath at the house in Archer Court. The front door was open. Not bothering to knock, he strode inside.

"Oy, who are you?"

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It was a man Max had never seen, in shirtsleeves and a flat cap. "Max Carpenter," he barked. "Who the hell are you?"

Abuse was a language the man understood because he was a landlord. "This is my house. And I'm owed three months' rent. They kept saying the money was on the way."

"Looks like it got here."

The landlord pointed to a pale circle on the wall. "Took my best pieces. Antique mirror, that was. Carved oak frame, looked like Grindling Gibbons."

"No use asking you where to find her," Max said.

"You're joking. She's left town, she and her sister and their two nasty men."

The dawn was still breaking for Max. "The bloke in the suit, calls himself a lawyer?"

"When it suits his purposes."

"And the rough one with the ginger hair?"

"The sister's friend. He's the reason I stayed away. Put the frighteners on me good and proper. I wanted to come round with the police but he promised what he'd do to me."

Max was feeling the kinship of the fleeced. "Count your blessings. You're well rid of them." He turned to go. "By the way," he said, "does she have a child? A boy named Patrick?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Their kind are too selfish to waste themselves on children."

The landlord followed Max to the door. "If you're her friend," he said, "you should take over her debt. Part of it, anyway."

Max wanted to be on the train, escaping back to his orderly life in London. "Get stuffed," he said resolutely as he set out on the downhill walk to the police station. He was going to turn in the list he had obtained from the bank teller of the serial numbers on his hundred-pound notes.

With a little bit of luck, he might see Oleander again—at her trial.

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Ruby needed more scope, she said, more room to maneuver. She had more in her, she said, than any two or three men could handle, if they'd just wait their turn. She said that Gladewater had too much propinquity for a girl with her propensities (Ruby was a schoolteacher) . . .

THE EVIL OF DRINK

by EDMOND K. DOAK

It was the first time I laid eyes on this old friend in nearabout forty years. It did my heart good just to see his face again. I thought he'd of been dead long before now, sick as he was at one time.

He had the kind of face that's easy to remember—never does change much, little baby-face nose and mouth. Even with white hair, he still looked about twenty years old.

So when I was walking from the Greyhound bus station over to the city bus line and I saw this fellow out sweeping the sidewalk in front of a little old bar, I just walked up to him and said, "I bet you're old Sonny Hines." He looked at me and said that nobody's called him Sonny since his mother died, and was he supposed to know me?

"Sure," I says. "I'm Harry Hawkins."

"Of course," he says. "It's that bald head throwed me off, but I remember now—your old daddy was bald as an egg, too. Come on inside out of this sun, we'll have the place to ourselves for a while. How about a beer?"

I asked him about himself and about some of the friends we knew back there before the war. He said he'd never been much good after that time he was sick for so long, but he managed to get enough light work—like being a night watchman and so on—that he got a little Social Security now and some food stamps, and he had this good-natured friend that let him open the bar and work until about eleven each morning. He said Jimmy and Ruby had finally gotten

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married and moved back to Gladewater, Texas, where Ruby had come from.

Then I asked him if he ever heard anything about Nick, our friend that'd left town so sudden while Sonny was sick.

"The last I heard about Nick," Sonny said, "was about three years ago. They said he was doing fine, making good brooms, but not doing so well with his Braille because he never could spell much in the first place." That's when this pleased-with-himself look came over his face and I knowed he had something he was busting to tell me.

To go back a little bit, there was this little group of fellows that run around together, played a little penny ante, shot a little craps, drank a little beer—that sort of thing. Jimmy was a used-car salesman—the damndest judge of a used car you ever saw, could tell you within a week just how long an old jalopy would hold out. He'd buy a pile of junk that had about two months left in it, drive it for six weeks, and sell it to some fool while it was still running and get himself another one. So he always had hisself a car, the only one of us that did. He was always the friendly type, never gave anybody any trouble, didn't even tell many lies, except when it came to selling used cars.

Sonny was the baby of the outfit—had a good disposition. He couldn't hold any sort of a good regular job because he had to help his mother with his old grandpa every morning and sit with him sometimes in the afternoon. So Sonny just did odd jobs—delivered circulars, carried medicines for the drugstores, filled in as a waiter when somebody got sick, did some yard work in the summer, things like that.

Nick was the tough one in the crowd. At least, he acted like he was tough and we was all too sweet-tempered to test him out. Niccolo Baldacci was his real name, but everybody called him Nick Bad-ass and he liked it. You know, they had a racetrack in Houston once, called it Epsom Downs, and ran real horse races and bet on them just like in other states before they changed the law again and shut them down for good. When they started building the track, somebody sent Nick down here to set things up so that citizens wouldn't have to take time off from their work and go out to the track to place their bets. And after he got the bookies started and some folks didn't pay up on their losses, Nick would reason with them. They said he handled some big accounts for the Maceos in Galveston, and for old Jakie Friedman out on South Main.

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Nick liked to walk around giving folks dirty looks, like George Raft in the movies, and he always wore white socks, winter and summer, with any kind of clothes. That was supposed to show he was a bad man, a member of whatever they called it then—it wasn't the Mafia back in those days. Maybe it was the Black Hand, or the Mob, or maybe it didn't have a name—but if you saw a man with white socks and didn't know he was wearing them for sore feet, you were supposed to watch out.

Nick may not have been the big bad man he liked to let on: he never showed much money, wouldn't play anything stronger than penny ante, and never paid for the drinks unless he had to.

And then there was Ruby. Ruby had been a schoolteacher up in Gladewater, Texas, with a big bull of a husband and a boy just starting high school. She got along all right until her husband got killed in an accident and left her a vigorous but lonely widow. Ruby was a generous old girl, with more than her share of Nature's inner needs. Fellows started fighting over her and it got so bad that the school board fired her for being promiscuous. So Ruby decided to move to Houston. She needed more scope, she said, more room to maneuver. She had more in her, she said, than any two or three men could handle, if they'd just wait their turn. She said Gladewater had too much propinquity for a girl with her propensities (I told you she was a schoolteacher) and maybe Houston would be big enough for her to keep her men apart. Her boy wanted to stay in Gladewater and play football, so Ruby left Joe Bib with relatives and came to Houston.

Jimmy was the first one of us to meet Ruby—when he sold her a used car—and after a week or two he took it back and gave her a lots better one at no extra charge. They got along real well together, just about all old Jimmy could handle, but she kept on seeing anybody else she wanted to see whenever she pleased. Somehow she latched onto Nick, not knowing much about him.

One night Nick got liquored up and got to acting mean and slapped Ruby around a little bit. "You hadn't ought to have done that, Nick," she said. "That hurt. Don't you ever hit me again." Nick said he'd hit her any time he damn well pleased.

I don't think Nick had ever run across a Girl of the Golden West before. Ruby picked up a bottle of ketchup by the neck and knocked the bottom off in the kitchen sink. "You want to start now, Mr. Badass? If you don't, you just put on those damned white socks and get your bad ass out of my apartment. And stay out. And if you start

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getting any ideas about any of that white-socks business, you just remember I can make just one phone call and get every roughneck and toolpusher in East Texas down here to help me, and half the Gladewater football team, too." Nick got out.

Ruby started being sweeter to Jimmy then—so much so she could just wrap him around her finger. She told him about Nick, and kinda laughed about it—didn't show no hard feelings. Finally, she said they ought to ask old Nick to have dinner with them some night at a good Italian restaurant, to show they was still friends. She picked out the night, picked out the table and the time, and showed everybody just where she wanted them to sit.

About this time, a young fellow with a burr haircut and sleeves a little too short for him walked up to the table. No doubt about him being a country boy. I was the only one who'd seen his picture and I knew this was Joe Bib, Ruby's boy from Gladewater. He came up close to the table on the side where Nick was sitting.

"Is there anybody around here named Bad-ass?" he asked, quiet-like.

"Some folks call me that," said Nick. He shoved his foot out a little farther and pulled up at the knee of his pants to show more of the white socks.

Joe Bib just stepped on Nick's foot and stood there. "Stand up," he says.

Now, Nick had been a prizefighter, had shoulders twice as wide as a man of his size. Ordinarily he could have licked half a dozen boys like Joe Bib, but he was a bob-and-weave kind of fighter, lots of fancy footwork, and it's hard to be light on your feet when a hundred and eighty pounds of East Texas innocence is standing on one of your feet and the other foot is still under the table. Nick started to rise and one hand moved toward his belt.

Joe Bib hit him while he was coming up and it was clear that they taught more in the Gladewater High School than football, for the boy had a five-dollar roll of dimes in his fist. Nick fell flat on his back and again started to grope toward his holster. Joe Bib stepped on his wrist with one foot and stomped the hand with the other. He was wearing cowboy boots, the old-fashioned kind with the slanty-cut heels, like ladies' shoes, and you could hear that pointed boot-heel crunching knuckle bones against the linoleum.

Joe Bib stepped back and looked down at Nick. "If I ever have to come back," he said, "I'll bring an axe handle." Then he looked at Ruby: "Come on, Momma. Let's get out of here."

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Ruby stood up and poured half a glass of beer on Nick's crotch, where it would look the worst. "I never knew a grown man before," she said so everybody could hear, "that goes around picking fights with high-school boys." Then she swishes her tail out of the restaurant so fancylike that anybody who hadn't seen it before would see it now.

Maybe you're wondering how Sonny comes into this. All this happened just before Sonny got so sick. You'da thought that Nick would come roaring back with something mighty mean, but he just left town. None of us ever saw him again except for Jimmy, and that was just one time. I guess with a black eye, and his hand in a plaster cast, and being whipped by a high-school boy, and most people thinking he'd wet his own pants, he didn't look so mean after all, so folks decided he wore white socks because he liked white socks. Anyhow, he just left town real sudden and none of us ever seen him again until he turned up at a convention years later, where Sonny was tending bar.

Nobody knew why Sonny got so sick so quick, and stayed sick so long. His momma kept him home in bed for two or three months and had the doctor see him every week when he came by to check on old grandpa. The doctor said he wasn't sure what it was that Sonny had—maybe a bilious fever. He told Sonny's momma the boy ought to be in a hospital, but she said she'd talked to the hospital and they said since nobody knew what it was he had, they had to put him in a private room at five dollars a day. Mrs. Hines said she didn't have no five dollars a day to spare, and no time to spend riding back and forth on the streetcar to and from the hospital all day. She said she'd nursed her father for five years and she reckoned she was as good a nurse as any they had in the hospital, and the doctor had to come by anyway, so why couldn't he just take care of Sonny along with grandpa?

So then the doctor said maybe they ought to have a consultation, have another doctor see Sonny, so he called a friend of his, a doctor who officed downtown and helped the old doctor when he needed it—especially with operations, like if somebody needed their gallbladder took out. This other doctor saw Sonny and said he sure did look bilious to him, but he didn't think it would help much to take his gallbladder out, and since Sonny had sort of leveled off and wasn't getting any worse maybe they'd better just wait and see. . .

I dropped by to see Sonny every once in a while and he kept on

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looking worse, with his skin so splotchy and sort of broke out, but he was eating more and gaining a little strength. Finally, he was able to get out of bed and walk around a little, but his face was a fright to see—all covered with warts and splotches. And it wasn't just his face—he was that way all over. His back made me think of the time I dropped my pencil in the high-school library and looked up at the bottom of that old table, with about ten years' worth of dried chewing-gum stuck under it.

When the doctor thought Sonny was strong enough to go downtown, I borrowed Jimmy's car and took him down to the Medical Arts Building to see a skin doctor. That doctor said he thought Sonny ought to go see a kind of doctor they called a diagnostician. This doctor said it all reminded him of something but he couldn't remember what it was, so he sent Sonny up to a laboratory for a lot of tests and told him to come back in a week and bring somebody along next time that could tell him more about what went on when Sonny got sick and just before—how it all began.

Jimmy went along with Sonny next time and tried to help him answer the doctor's questions, like was anybody else in the family sick, and did his momma ever have any babies born dead or deformed, and had Sonny ever traveled to foreign parts or gone out on Six-bit Street where all the sailors found their girls—stuff like that. He asked what Sonny had to eat that day, and Sonny said he ate breakfast with his momma and later tried to eat a hamburger, but not much of that. It seemed all right—he just wasn't hungry.

The doctor asked if anybody else got sick about the same time and Jimmy said come to think about it, *he* had felt bad that night and was under the weather for two or three days after. That made the doctor's ears perk up and he got to asking about everything the boys had done that day.

Here's how it worked out. That morning, Jimmy called Sonny and asked him if he would like to ride out to Hempstead with him to see about some used cars. Sonny said sure, as soon as he finished bathing grandpa. So Jimmy came by and picked him up and they drove downtown. Jimmy parked by the Union National Bank Building and said he had to see a man about some financing and wouldn't be but a minute.

Well, it turned out to be a lot longer than a minute. Sonny looked in the glove compartment, thinking he might find a roadmap or something else to look at. What he found was a pint bottle of Scotch whisky with just about one drink out of it. He knew Scotch was the

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only whisky Ruby liked, the only kind she'd drink, and just thought she'd left it there, so he took a little nip.

When Jimmy finally got back to the car, there wasn't much of the whisky left.

"Where'd you get the whisky?" said Jimmy.

"Oh, I just looked in the glove compartment and there it was," said Sonny. "I knew it was Ruby's kind of whisky and supposed she'd got out of the car and left it there."

"I can see you never saw Ruby get out of a car," said Jimmy. "Ruby never walked away from a bottle of Scotch in her life. Give me that bottle, you've had enough for one morning." So Jimmy took the last drink out of the bottle and later throwed it in the ditch. It wasn't until night that they could see Sonny wasn't just drunk—he was sick, bad sick.

The doctor said, "I think I got it now. We'll see." He cut off a little piece of Sonny's hair and put it in a tube and cut off a piece of Jimmy's hair, too. He says come back in two days.

Two days later he tells them they've both been poisoned with arsenic—Sonny's hair showed a lot and Jimmy's hair showed a little. It must have been in that bottle of Scotch. But where did the whisky come from?

Jimmy remembered that he and Ruby had been out in his car the night before all this, and that she had her bottle of Scotch, but she took it in with her and he was sure of that because she was complaining half the night that it wasn't enough and fussing that the package stores all closed so early. He damned sure didn't put the whisky there himself, and nobody could have broke into his car without him knowing it.

Then he remembered.

He said Nick had called him at home early that morning before he went to Hempstead and told him he'd had a bad toothache all night, like maybe Joe Bib had broken one of his teeth, and would Jimmy please pick him up in his car and take him downtown to the Medical Arts Building to see a dentist? And on the way downtown, Nick asked Jimmy if he'd mind stopping at the cleaners and take in his pair of pants that needed cleaning and pressing. That must have been when Nick put the poisoned whisky in the glove compartment, because we found out later he didn't go up to see the dentist, never did go back for his pants, and probably had walked

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directly over from the Medical Arts Building to Union Station and took the first train out of town.

Well, nobody saw hair nor hide of Nick until Sonny run across him at this convention some years back. They was having a big convention of vending-machine people in Houston and Sonny was tending bar at one of the booths.

Here come Nick, slick as usual, a little greyer in the head and still wearing white socks. He recognized Sonny right off, just like I did. The two of them, they chewed the fat a little about old times and so on, and Sonny didn't let on he knew anything about anything, or being sick or anything, and it seemed Nick didn't know anything, either.

Nick asked about the old gang and Sonny said he hadn't heard much about me since the war. He specially didn't say much about Ruby and Jimmy, just said he hadn't heard from them in a long time, didn't know how they were getting along. He wanted to see what Nick was working up to, because Nick kept on asking little questions that might not seem to mean much unless you knew what it was he wanted to find out. Sonny just stalled him along, without seeming to, and kept on asking Nick about himself.

Nick was working out of El Paso, he said, running a string of vending machines in the little towns up and down the river, with slot machines stuck in wherever he could find a place. He had just been out to Hawaii and told Sonny all about it.

He told him about a drink they made out there, something they called a Chi-Chi—said they made it with all kinds of fruit flavor and cream and God knows what all, so it tasted real sweet and good and you couldn't tell it had any vodka in it at all.

Nick said those Hawaiian fellows used the Chi-Chi to play tricks on the tourist girls, like little-town schoolteachers out there to see the sights and have a good time. If you winked at the bartender, he'd double the vodka, and after a couple of those innocent little ice-cream-soda drinks the girls wouldn't care what they did or remember that they'd done it.

Sonny said he wished he knew how to make a drink like that, and Nick said he had the recipe in his pocket and would write it out for him if Sonny would promise to have the ingredients on hand the next night, just in case Nick found a girl that looked young and innocent.

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So the next night Nick came up to the bar and asked Sonny did he have the stuff for the Chi-Chi.

"Sure," says Sonny, "but I'm not sure I know how to mix it just right. Let me give you one on the house so you can taste it and tell me if it's like it's supposed to be."

Nick agrees and Sonny turns around to get all the things for the drink. He mixes a little of this and a little of that and stirs it around and gives Nick the drink and watches him drink it. Then he washes the glass, takes off his apron, and sneaks out of the hall.

He hotfoots it over to the Greyhound station with his things in a shopping bag. "When's your next bus leaving town?" he asked the ticket clerk.

"Where you want to go?" asked the clerk.

"Right now I'm thinking more about when than about where," said Sonny, looking around the station.

"If you ain't in so big of a hurry that thirty minutes makes a lot of difference, I can send you almost anywhere. I've got Night Owls going north, south, east, and west. They'll all be boarding in a few minutes. The first one out goes to Galveston."

"That's too close," says Sonny. He thinks a minute. "Got anything going to Gladewater?"

"If you don't mind a little layover up the country aways, I can get you to Gladewater about eight in the morning."

"I'll take it," says Sonny. "Can I board now?"

Sonny had a little breakfast at the Bon Ton Cafe in downtown Gladewater and set out to find Ruby and Jimmy. He found the old bungalow where the telephone book said it would be and knocked on the doorframe around the dusty screen door. A dim figure loomed behind the screen and an old woman croaked, "I don't think we want any."

"I'm looking for Mrs. Ruby Tucker," said Sonny. The woman stepped closer and laid one hand firmly on the hook that held the screen door closed. Sonny could see the heavy features, the grey eyebrows and fuzzy upper lip, all topped by a wig so black it looked like a derby hat. The wig was on crooked—might have been backward, Sonny told me—and had rigid marcelled waves that went back to the Hoover Administration.

The woman scowled and squinted like she couldn't see too good. "Well, you've found her," she said. "Who're you? What do you want?"

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She lifted the spectacles that hung from her neck, their lenses as thick as the bottoms of old Coca-Cola bottles. "Why, Sonny Hines, you old scooter! I'd know that baby face of yours anywhere, once I could see it! Come in this house, boy—come in this house!"

She opened the screen door, then turned away. "Jimmy," she roared, "come see who's here!" She lowered her voice. "He's about as deaf as I am blind. Damn these cataracts!"

Ruby made instant coffee in her microwave and slit open a package of Tays-Tee store-bought doughnuts. The three sat around the kitchen table and shot the breeze, bringing each other up to date. When somebody mentioned Nick, Sonny leaned his elbows on the table and began to look wise. "Now that you mention it," he said, casual-like, "I saw Nick just this week."

Jimmy leaned forward and stared scowling at the little mouth, hoping to see what words he might not hear clearly. Ruby wasn't sure why, but she put her glasses on again so as not to miss anything. Sonny told them about the convention and talking to Nick and what Nick was doing in El Paso and about the Chi-Chi and fixing the drink. He didn't tell them about leaving town in such a hurry.

"You ain't telling us everything, Sonny," says Ruby. "You little rascal, what did you put in that Chi-Chi? Croton oil in the vodka?"

"No," says Sonny, kind of slowlike, "no croton oil. Not even any vodka. Just three jiggers of wood alcohol."

"Why, Sonny, that's enough to make a man go blind!"

Sonny's little eyes twinkled. "That's what the druggist told me when I bought it." And his little mouth smiled.

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***NEW* from**

HEIDI VANDERBILT

Marta listened for breathing, for the first sound of someone about to apologize for waking her. But the silence was total, as though she were connected to nothing, the phone useless.

She put on her glasses. The orange digital numbers on the alarm clock read 11:34. She'd be ashamed to call someone this late, too. When Sammy came to live with her six months ago, Christine had called day and night, drunk and abusive. Marta had changed her number, and had given this new unlisted number to only a half dozen close friends, the children's school, the social workers, and Darren.

"Hello? Darren?"

The caller disconnected . . .

STEALING JUNIPERS

by HEIDI VANDERBILT

Marta listened to Sammy's long hiccoughing sobs. He had been upstairs crying in his room for the past hour, since his mother Christine ended her visit, having given presents to Marta and Ezra but refusing Sammy anything, even a hug. She had swept out of the house, trailed by their social worker, Belinda, and left her son weeping upstairs. Marta went up twice to comfort him. He clung to her, then pushed her away and screamed to be left alone. Marta's own son Ezra had gone to bed. Neither child ate his dinner, so Marta ate theirs, chewing hypnotically until all the food was gone.

She unwrapped a leftover Halloween candy bar. Ruckus trotted in and laid his head on her knee. She gave him the chocolate and unwrapped another for herself.

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Halloween was over. They hadn't gone out, thanks to Christine. And no one had come down the long dirt road to beg at their door—a good thing, considering what was going on inside. Ezra and Sammy had planned their costumes a month ahead. Ezra was trick-or-treating as a World War II bomber pilot. Sammy wanted to be a ghost.

"A scary ghost?" Marta had asked him.

"No, an invisible ghost. A Sammy-you-don't-see," his voice too tired and resigned for a seven-year-old. "A Sammy-who-isn't."

Through thick glasses, she looked at herself in the mirror that hung by the cookbooks. There was a chocolate smudge on her lower lip. If she ate all the candy in the basket, would she feel better? Could she trade a bellyache for her hatred of Christine? She hated Christine for her dyed black hair, her tattoos, her madness.

Why had she ever gotten involved with them?

"Don't get involved," the people in town had told her.

"Christine's rich. You can't do anything."

"What goes on between parent and child is no one else's business."

"We just keep our fingers crossed for that little boy."

Almost a year ago, Sammy had called Marta. Then Christine called. Her driver's license had been revoked. Marta went to her huge, filthy house that overlooked the Sound to pick Sammy up. Christine, drunk, had hitchhiked, staggering, to Marta's house in the woods to bring him home.

When the judge finally removed Sammy, he went to live with Marta and Ezra until the court could decide what was best for him. What had started as a few days' visit became a few weeks, then months. As Marta got to know the lawyers and social workers assigned to their case, her conviction deepened that Sammy was in danger, not only from his mother but from the people who were supposed to be helping him. There was another hearing tomorrow. Belinda assured her this one would result in a ruling. But she always said that.

If only Christine would get help, admit she needed help. Marta wanted her life back: time alone with Ezra, time alone when Ezra visited his father. She wanted to lie on her bed, watch TV and eat ice cream out of the container, not sharing. She'd date again, get her life back on track. She could travel again, take Ezra to Florida to visit his grandmother, go to Disneyworld. A ward of the court, Sammy couldn't leave the state, so Marta was confined by his boundaries. She could leave with Ezra, but who would care for Sammy while they were away? How would he feel being left?

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Sammy's sobs grew louder.

"I hate this," Marta told her nearsighted reflection in the mirror. "I hate it."

"Never say hate," Marta's mother had told her when she was ten. "You don't hate. You dislike."

Marta's chin quivered. She stood before her mother, twisting one heavy brown oxford behind the other. Her mother disapproved of sturdy, structured shoes, which Marta's school required as part of the dress code. Mrs. Cummings and the school were at war over Marta's clothes, which her mother had always selected, overriding her father's advice to let Marta choose her own. The dress code was new, Marta's secret delight. Five days a week now, she could look like everyone else, not like her mother's doll.

"It's a sin to hate." Her mother glared at the oxfords. "Do you have any idea how bad those things are for your feet? They keep the muscles from working. You can dislike strongly," she went on, "but you may not hate."

"You hate these shoes."

"I dislike them. They're ridiculous. I don't hate them. Murderers hate."

"Can I hate a murderer?" Marta asked.

Marta ate another candy bar and fed another to Ruckus. A sizzling pain in her right temple sent her up to the bathroom for aspirin. She sat on the closed toilet seat and leaned her forehead into her cool palm. Sammy's cries were muffled by the closed door. It could be anyone's child crying—another mother's problem, not hers.

She pictured her ex-husband Darren's medicine cabinet. Darren had medicine for everything from asthma to zits, arranged alphabetically. He kept the vials in three glass-fronted cabinets he'd hung in a row on the wall opposite the shower. One of life's great pleasures, he had told her, is the cessation of pain.

She wet a washcloth and pressed it against her eyes, rested her head on her knees, and dozed.

"Mom? Mom?"

She opened the door. Ezra wore his football pajamas and blue-terry robe. He was so small he looked six, not eight.

"I thought you were asleep." Her head felt better—the aspirin must be working.

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"Can't. I told him he can have the coat his mom gave me, but he just yelled at me. Can I take a bath?"

She ran the tub for him and poured in bubble bath. From his bathrobe pockets he brought out a half dozen plastic soldiers and a cannon he arranged along the side of the tub before getting in.

"Who are you at war with tonight?" she asked.

He looked up at her through his dark lashes. "Sammy."

She sat on her bed and dialed Anne Timms, her neighbor down the hill. Anne once had a foster child. She gave him back.

"I need help, Anne."

"You can't let this go on," Anne said. "You gotta object. Tell someone. Tell the idiot social worker. Tell that therapist. If you don't tell them what's happening, how will they know?"

Marta called Susan Svensen, Sammy's therapist, and told her. She heard the scratch of Susan's pen, the paper rustling.

"Slow down," Susan said, and Marta paused. "Okay. Go on."

Ezra came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, and climbed on the bed. He lined up his soldiers on her sheets. Marta took a corner of the towel and, as she talked, rubbed his damp black curls. He had goosebumps along his arms and his stomach was mottled blue. He had his father's hair, she thought, but her skin. He pulled back the covers and climbed into bed.

Sammy screamed again.

Marta held the phone away from her, toward the bedroom door. "Hear him, Susan? I need help. I don't know what to do. Susan?"

"I'm thinking."

Sammy shrieked, the sound so piercing Marta felt it slice her skin.

"Obviously," Susan said, "this can't continue. It isn't in Sammy's best interest. I'll recommend the visits be more aggressively supervised, or terminated altogether."

"But what about tonight? Do you want me to bring him in to see you?"

"I think that would just upset him more."

"Then what should I *do?*" Her voice cracked.

Ezra pointed his finger at Sammy's room and pulled an imaginary trigger.

"For Christ's sake, Susan, I can't stand much more of this. What if Sammy has to testify tomorrow? He'll be all freaked out again. How much of this are we going to be put through?"

"I hear you, Marta, I hear you. I'm just trying to think what would

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be best. You know," Susan said slowly, "you could call Sammy's pediatrician and ask for a prescription to help him sleep."

"Sedate him? Great. Any other ideas?"

Susan sighed. "Just try to get through tonight, okay? We'll talk tomorrow before court. Good luck."

Ezra put his arms around his mother's neck. Marta kissed his temple, her pale eyelashes brushing his black ones. She ran her thumb along the arch of his eyebrow, smoothing the hairs. He smelled of Vitabath and Bubble Yum.

She walked him to bed, then crossed the hall to Sammy's room. He had fallen asleep, curled into a rigid ball on the floor beside his bed, his white-blond head pressed against the wall, his hands clenched. Pillows and stuffed animals were strewn around the room. He had pulled all the books out of the bookcase, all his clothes out of the drawers. Marta was afraid to move him, to disturb his sleep. She pulled the blankets off his bed and covered him. Then she switched on the night light by his dresser and closed the door.

She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

The silence woke her completely. She pressed the receiver against her ear.

"Hello?"

She listened for breathing, for the first sound of someone about to apologize for waking her. But the silence was total, as though she were connected to nothing, the phone useless.

She put on her glasses. The orange digital numbers on the alarm clock read 11:34. She'd be ashamed to call someone this late, too. When Sammy came to live with her six months ago, Christine had called day and night, drunk and abusive. Marta had changed her number, and had given this new unlisted number to only a half dozen close friends, the children's school, the social workers, and Darren.

"Hello? Darren?"

The caller disconnected.

When they first broke up over a year ago and she moved from Los Angeles to the island, he would call late at night. Sometimes he wanted to talk, other times he just listened to her saying hello—hello? Then he would hang up. But he hadn't done that for months.

Wind blew the fireplace damper open, then shut. The metallic

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clang carried up the stairs from the living room. Frost glittered in the corners of the panes. Through the bare branches of the maple outside her room, the sky was speckled with sharp white stars.

The pipes clanked, hissed, clanked again, but the old house, drafty and leaky, had cooled almost to the temperature of the night air. There might as well be no heat, she thought, no walls at all.

She closed her eyes and tried to recapture her dream, but it had slipped away. Instead, she saw the island's coastline, its cliffs and pines, black against a blue-black sky. She saw the ridge of hills running down the north side, growing taller and sharper as it approached Taylor's Peak. She drifted. Her legs twitched her awake. Then she was asleep, traveling fast over the black water.

The phone.

"Hello?"

She thought she heard something.

"Hello?"

It could still be an accident, or kids making prank calls. She got up and went to the hall closet, pulled a sleeping bag off the top shelf, dragged it back to bed, and stuffed it under the covers. For Christmas she'd buy herself and the kids electric blankets. She tucked her icy feet into the bag, zipped it up to her chin, and propped last Sunday's crossword puzzle against her knees.

She felt herself drifting.

Sammy and Ezra would eventually make peace with each other. They might never be best friends, but how many brothers were? And better for her—and Ezra, too—that she stand up for Sammy, prevent him vanishing into state-run homes and agencies. Otherwise Ezra might worry that Marta would let *him* go. What would tell Ezra that *he* was different, that she would hold him to her forever, no matter what?

Wouldn't it be better for them all, since Christine couldn't take Sammy back, that Marta hang in there, stop complaining, stop dreaming about time for herself, fun and travel? Few people in their whole lives had the opportunity to help and love someone who so needed it.

From her own year as a foster child within her own family, she knew so well what he was feeling. She would love Sammy as her own, as herself.

She woke thinking she heard the phone. But it was only the sound

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of the rising wind. She turned off the light. As she fell back to sleep, she pictured the boys waving to her from the bus window, their faces pale in the steamy glass, their mouths open and round, calling.

Twelve-thirty. She was sweating, but her feet were still icy. She reached down to rub them and the phone rang. This time she heard a low, hollow moan.

"Who is this?"

Another moan.

"Do you need help?"

Laughter, then disconnect.

She slammed down the phone. It had to be Christine. As if she hadn't done enough damage during her visit—now this. That's enough, Marta raged, her breath a high thin whine in her lungs. Too damn much.

She stared at the phone on the bedside table. It was black, old-fashioned, ugly, with a new crack along the side.

I'm calling Belinda, she decided. She's the social worker—this is her responsibility, not mine. Sammy's got to go. He's not mine, anyway. Belinda can come get him tomorrow morning before court.

As she pictured calling for help, the phone seemed to move away from her. Her arm could never reach far enough to pick up the receiver, to dial.

I'm not going through another minute of this. It's Belinda's problem as much as it is mine. She didn't help Sammy this afternoon, didn't try to stop his mother from hurting his feelings, treating him like garbage. Let *her* be up in the middle of the night, Marta thought, let *her* phone ring. I've done plenty. Let *her* sit up figuring what to do next.

She grabbed the phonebook and tore through it, looking for Belinda's number. "I can't stand any more," she whimpered. "I can't stand any more."

Her hand shaking, she dialed, got the numbers wrong. Dialed again. Fumbled again.

"Marta?"

"Damn it!" She hit the phone.

"Marta?"

Sammy stood at the foot of the bed. In yellow pajamas with feet. Sammy. His eyes red-rimmed, as if crying had made him drunk. A cowlick tufting off-center. His thumb in his mouth. Sammy. Rubbing the teddy bear she gave him—her old bear—against his cheek.

"Marta? I'm sorry for how I behaved. Please accept my 'pology."

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He sounded forty-seven, not seven. Why was he standing in her room at this time of night, making a formal apology for something that wasn't his fault? Then she understood. He could never be a child—he could never trust adults to care for him. And here she was whimpering like a child, about to give him up.

"Oh, Sammy!" She swept him into her arms.

"You're my only mommy now," he said.

"Your mother loves you, honey. She's just not feeling well."

"You're my only mommy."

When he dozed, Marta carried him back to his bed and tucked him in.

Down the hall in Ezra's room, where Ruckus stretched across the bed, Ezra had stacked his bathrobe and parka on top of his quilt. Marta leaned to kiss him, heard his teeth chatter. She took off her bathrobe and added it to his covers.

She turned the hall thermostat up and went back to her own bed.

Two A.M. Marta woke to the sound of rain on the windows, someone knocking at the front door. Ruckus barked, clattered down the stairs. Marta followed.

"Who's there?" She could hear her heart beating, louder than the wind outside.

How far to the phone? Enough time to call for help? Had she locked everything? Doors? Windows?

"Who's there?" she called louder.

She flipped on the porch light and cracked the door against its chain. On the stoop, ghostly in rain and wind, stood Christine, her black hair plastered by freezing rain. Her wet fur coat hung heavily off her shoulders, molded to the alcoholic bulge of her belly, she appeared half drowned and frozen, five miles from town. She held a tiny tree no more than a foot tall—the roots, washed bare of earth, straggled over her tattooed hands. Marta's heart slammed in her throat.

"I brought you a house present!" Christine shouted against the wind. Ruckus growled.

"It's two A.M., Christine! How did you get here?" Leave, she prayed. Just please disappear. This can't be happening. "Did you call earlier?" She pressed her mouth to the opening. "Was that you?"

Christine nodded. "I've been stealing junipers." She sounded proud, a little girl on an adventure.

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"Stay there. I'm calling you a cab." I don't need this, Marta thought.

"Let me in. I'll be good. 'All saints revile her and all sober men,' " she sang over the storm.

"Shut up!"

"I won't wake the children, Marta. Promise. I just need to talk. I walked all the way out here. Be my friend, Marta. You used to be my friend, remember?"

No, I don't remember, Marta thought. *No one* was dumb enough to make friends with Christine.

"You've got to leave!"

Christine held the tree out to her. "A present?"

"We don't want any more of your presents!"

Christine dropped the tree to her side. "You used to be my friend, Marta. 'Sister of the mirage and echo—' "

"Go away!"

Christine shivered. In the pale drenched light, Marta saw her lips were blue.

"I'll be good, Marta. I really will. Look. I'm cold effing sober."

Looking hard into her eyes, Marta saw that she was. She had seen Christine drunk and between drunk. Now she *was* sober. Maybe she had come to her senses, realized what she was doing to her son. Maybe she was ready to try being a mother again. Marta couldn't just leave her out there. What if Sammy woke and found his mother locked out in a storm, Marta cowering inside?

"Okay, okay, come in. But I am calling you a cab. You damn well better behave until it gets here or I'll call the cops."

Ruckus sniffed at her, unsure, then lay under the table, watching. While Marta phoned for the taxi, Christine put the little tree in the sink.

"You'll plant it, won't you, Marta? Give it a home like you're giving Sammy?"

Damn right I'm giving Sammy a home, Marta thought. Thanks to you, he needs one.

"He's just here until after the hearing, Chris. Until the judge decides what to do."

"There *is* nothing to do. Oh, Marta, don't you understand?" She bit at the tattoos on her hands as if she could tear them off. "I can't raise a child."

"Someone's got to raise him," Marta said. "You're his mother."

Christine's teeth chattered. Marta handed her a towel.

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"Sammy really misses you." She put water on the stove to boil.

Christine wrapped the towel around her shoulders, patted her streaming hair as ineffectually as a child. "I can't even take care of myself, Marta." She stood and paced the hall, looking at Marta's photographs, framed enlargements of faces, details blown up: the corner of an eye, the curl of an ear, a mole at the hairline. She sat back down.

"It's November first. My birthday."

"I thought we were talking about Sammy." Marta banged a mug of instant cocoa in front of her and sat opposite.

Christine leaned close, the whites of her eyes like dirty marble.

"Cold, isn't it? 'But we are gifted even in November, rarest of seasons, with so huge a sense of her nakedly worn magnificence.' That's pretty, isn't it? I want Samuel to know poetry. Robert Frost. Robert Graves. To our graves with Graves."

They sat in silence. Marta heard the clock tick, the furnace kick on and off, the breath whistling through Christine's nose.

"Ever meet my mother?" Christine asked. "No, you didn't. They say she's dead. But I'm not afraid, am I, Marta?"

"Everyone's afraid."

"Not *me!*"

"Shhhh!"

"Not me." Christine rattled the mug in tiny spinning orbits. "My mother can't rest. Not her. She runs on, Marathon Mom. I bob in her shock waves."

Go away, Marta thought. Her eyes burned with fatigue.

"When I was eight, Marta? The school told my parents I needed help. Know what happened then? Nothing." Her face bobbed in front of Marta, her breath heavy with old meals, old cigarettes. "Nothing, Marta. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Why didn't they do anything, Marta? Why? Isn't a parent supposed to help a child? I might have been all right, you know. I might have made it. Sammy, too. My Sammy."

Marta reached out and touched Christine's hand.

"My parents wouldn't help me, Marta, but I'll help Sammy." She looked up, her eyes red, and placed her hand over Marta's. "Shall I tell you what it's like being me? My world?"

Please don't, Marta wanted to say, but Christine went on.

"I live in a closet, the door shut, no light. Sometimes I feel the walls around me, rags in my face. I think maybe I'll find the door. Other times, there are no walls, only corridors of blackness emptying

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into blackness. Down one tunnel, monsters. Down another, voices. They tell me things. Sometimes they tell me to cut off my fingers." She spread her hand, the tattoos dancing in front of her angled, bloodshot eyes.

"Sometimes I see out. Like now. I see Marta in her kitchen with her plants, her photographs, her children's drawings on the refrigerator. I see Marta sitting with her friend, Christine."

"You can get help, Chris. Really."

Marta's own mother had toppled over into psychosis after her father died. ("I am nothing without him, nothing.") She had boozed, immobilized for days, not even recognizing her terrified, twelve-year-old daughter. One morning before the sun came up, Marta woke to find her mother standing over her. Dressed in a lavender sweatsuit. Marta's mother drove her to her aunt's, then checked into the hospital.

For months, Marta lived with aunts, moving on to another when one tired of keeping her. Some of the houses she lived in were familiar, some not. Some of her cousins welcomed her, others didn't. She was always a guest, an outsider.

"No matter how I swear I won't go back to that darkness," Christine was saying, "it always happens. I can't help myself. No one can. Once I thought that if I just kept my eyes open, didn't sleep, didn't blink—"

"You can be helped!"

"Bullshit, Marta."

The difference, Marta realized, between Christine and her mother was that her mother had wanted help. She ran to it, dressed for a marathon. The difference between Sammy and Marta was that there would be no mother who would ever come for him. Christine would never recover in time to help him—if ever. He would live the rest of his life the way Marta had lived that year, unwelcome and in pain. Other foster parents like Anne Timms could send a child on. But Marta couldn't just pack Sammy up and dump him. He had chosen her, come to her again and again.

"I don't want help," Christine went on. "I'd lose my beautiful dark world, my special place. Where would I go? Who would I be? Would you give up your world for mine?" She went to the sink, lifted the little juniper, and held it to her cheek. "You will plant this?"

Marta nodded.

"Stealing junipers," Christine mused. "That's what *you're* doing,

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Marta. Transplanting for no reason." She banged her palm against the tabletop. *"No reason!"*

"Christine!"

"You take what belongs one place, tear it up, move it away—"

"You're going to wake the kids!"

Christine towered over her. "He's my kid and I'll wake him if I want! Who are you, bitch, *who are you?"* She turned slowly around, looking at the kitchen, the prisms hanging in the window, cactuses in clay pots, a ceramic cow creamer with one broken horn, ivy trying to root in a water glass. "Who are you, bitch?" She sat down.

Marta looked at the clock on the wall. Please God the dispatcher hadn't gone back to sleep. She'd called over an hour ago.

"Who are you, anyway?" Christine demanded. "I know! I know who you are. You steal junipers."

"That was you, Chris."

"It was? Oh."

"Where did you get it?"

"Down the hill."

Marta glanced out the window toward the Timmses' farm. In the darkness below, she saw headlights moving.

Christine said, "I pulled it out from between two rocks. It would have grown up all crooked if I hadn't rescued it."

Just a little longer, Marta thought. Hang on.

"I'm not sure it's a juniper," she told Christine. "I think it might be a fir, or a cedar. I'm not very good at trees."

"That's 'cause you can't see the forest for 'em. We could be friends, Marta. We're both mothers. I wish I had a mother. I wish somebody loved me. The only person who loves me is Sammy. They say I molested him. Is that reasonable? Do you think I raped my Samuel, my own little man? I don't. I don't think it's reasonable at all." Her eyes were opaque. "Could you screw Ezra?"

"No."

"The cab's here! Tell you what. Let's go to my house."

"No."

"I don't want to be alone!"

"And I'm not leaving the kids!"

Christine circled behind her and laid her hands lightly on Marta's neck. Ruckus moved out from under the table, growling.

"You want me to care for Sammy, remember?" Sweat ran down Marta's ribs.

"Come with me, Marta."

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"You want me to give him a home."

"A home." Christine laughed suddenly and stepped back. "Well, maybe I did." She twirled into her ragged coat. "I'm for an evening on the town. Party time for the birthday girl."

Outside, the cab honked softly.

"Coming!" Christine gathered her bag and gloves and pulled the door open. "Oh, yum! Look at that!" she giggled. "Carrot Cake!"

The taxi's dome light shone on the young driver's brassy red hair. Marta recognized him as one of the ferry's daytime ticket-takers.

"Yes, indeedy," Christine said. "Carrot Cake for my birthday. 'Yummy yummy yummy, I got love in my tummy," she sang. "Good-time Chrissy is ready to go. See you in court, Marta."

Marta slammed and locked the door.

"I'll be there, Chris. I'll be there."

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first publication in the U.S.

DID SHERLOCK HOLMES MEET HERCULE—?

by JULIAN SYMONS

Did Sherlock Holmes ever meet Hercule Poirot? It is their possible encounter that gives peculiar interest to the following story, found among the papers of Poirot's friend Captain Arthur Hastings, who recorded a number of the great Belgian detective's cases. Why should an affair involving Sherlock Holmes and narrated by Dr. Watson be among the Hastings papers? Perhaps the narrative itself answers the question. It is unfortunately not quite complete, but there can be no more than a single page missing at the end.

Sherlock Holmes would shake his head when I mentioned the name of Mulready and say the world was not yet prepared to hear about an affair that involved a chief Minister of the Crown, secret papers, and the threat of war. Yet it can do no harm to set down the extraordinary series of events involving the inhabitants of Mulready House while they remain fresh in my mind.

It was an autumn morning a couple of years before Holmes's retirement, and I had spent the night with my old friend in Baker Street. Breakfast was finished, he had done with the papers, and was roaming about the room, talking discursively as was his wont, when he stopped at the window.

"Halloa, Watson. Our humble lodgings are about to be unusually honored."

"Holmes, if you are going to give me some of those far-fetched deductions about—"

Holmes laughed. "No, no, my dear fellow. It is true that when I see a man being driven up in the latest model of Rolls Royce motorcar, and when that vehicle has a crest on the door panel, I know

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a person of some distinction is likely to step out of it. But in fact I recognized the man himself. It is Lord Rivington."

A moment later, our Secretary for War was in the room. His features were familiar to me through many photographs and cartoons, but none had done full justice to the force in those craggy features, the intensity of the deep-set eyes behind the bushy brows. He looked from one of us to the other.

"Mr. Holmes, I have come to ask your help in a matter of great importance, and one that is absolutely confidential."

I rose, but Holmes stopped me. "You may speak in Dr. Watson's presence as freely as you would if I were alone."

"Nevertheless—" Sherlock Holmes was filling his pipe. He said nothing. Lord Rivington looked at him fiercely, then shrugged. "Very well, there is no time for argument. You are aware that negotiations are going on between this country and France that involve a plan for joint action if the Kaiser's saber-rattling should turn to the drawing of swords?"

"I know what is said in the newspapers, nothing more."

"The negotiations have reached a most delicate stage. You can imagine my feelings when I discovered through our Intelligence Service that everything we have discussed was known in Berlin, down to the last detail. And it was shown to me quite inescapably that the information must have reached Germany through the office of the man in charge of the negotiations, Sir Charles Mulready. He is one of my oldest friends, we were at school and the Varsity together. I could swear that he is a man of honor. Yet these papers have passed through no hands but his. You may ask how I can be so sure of this, Mr. Holmes. The answer is simple. I heard it yesterday from Sir Charles's own lips."

"Nobody in his office had access to them?"

"Nobody. They were kept in a safe, and were under lock and key when he took them home. And there has been no betrayal from the French side." Lord Rivington coughed. "Allies may have their own secrets. Certain matters mentioned in memoranda accompanying the documents have not been discussed with the French, yet these, too, are known in Berlin. They have not been stolen, hence they must have been either copied or photographed."

Holmes had been following with the keenest attention. "Does Sir Charles have any family links with Germany?"

"There you've hit it, Mr. Holmes. He married a German lady who had been left a widow with a young son when her husband, Count

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von Brankel, was killed in a hunting accident. The boy, Hans, has been brought up as if he were Charles's own son. He is intelligent, but I fear not manly. He was expelled from his public school—I am sure I need not enter into details. Then he studied medicine for a year, but gave it up and expressed a wish to become a stage actor, something which of course could not be countenanced. Accordingly, he follows no profession, lives at home, and sponges on his family. They have a daughter of their own, Lilian, who has some ridiculous idea that women should be allowed to vote, and that what she calls weapons of murder should be abolished. My friends have not been fortunate in their children."

"One more question. Am I right in thinking that our French allies would be interested in the memoranda they have not seen?"

For a moment the Secretary for War looked surprised. "Possibly, but the relations between our countries are entirely friendly. Monsieur Calamy, who is handling the negotiations, is in London and staying at Mulready House."

Holmes nodded.

"And now I come to the tragic climax. A draft known as Plan X has been prepared, setting out in detail our military and naval commitments to France in the event of war. Together with it was a memorandum about the defense of Britain which was for our eyes only, not those of M. Calamy. Both of these were in Sir Charles's possession. Yesterday, when what had been suspicions became certainties, I asked him to come and see me. He had been away from Whitehall corridors for a couple of days with an attack of gout, but he limped along to see me, and I told him what I had learned.

"He behaved as I would have expected, was first incredulous and then horrified. He protested his innocence, and I believed him." The great head bent down for a moment, then he looked from one of us to the other in despair. "Yet last night he made a confession of guilt, not in words but in his actions. He took an overdose of a medicine he used to ease his sufferings from gout. And there is worse to say. Both Plan X and the memorandum were with him, taken home for study. Both are missing."

A few minutes later, we were sitting in the Rolls Royce, on the way to the Mulready home in Mayfair.

The blinds were drawn over the long windows, and within the house we felt the somber atmosphere of sudden death. Lord Riving-

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ton led the way up to Sir Charles's suite, separated from his wife's by a dressing room.

"Lady Mulready found him in pain at some time in the night and immediately called his doctor, whose name is Cardew. He said Sir Charles must have suffered an acute attack of gout and taken an overdose of his medicine, but I fear it was taken deliberately."

"I know Dr. Cardew," I said. "A most reliable practitioner." I approached the bed where the body lay, decently covered by a sheet, and looked at the distorted features. An empty glass stood on a bedside table, with a bottle beside it, perhaps one-third full, labeled *Colnatium*. "This is a medicine often used for gout. It contains colchicum, which relieves the pain. I see no unusual circumstances here."

"Do you not, Watson?" Holmes had been prowling the room and the dressing room beyond, examining pictures, ornaments, a pipe rack, using his magnifying glass to look closely at a bureau in the dressing room. Now he, too, lifted the sheet, then looked carefully at the glass and bottle, tipping the latter and holding it to the light.

"Colchicum is a poison, like many plants and flowers that play a part in relieving pain. Yellow jasmine, spotted hemlock, the foxglove, the Calabar bean, and the paternoster pea—these can be as deadly as the poppy or laburnum seeds. I have in preparation a little pamphlet called 'The Poison Garden,' which should be useful to every medical practitioner. And colchicum may ease pain in small quantities, but in larger ones it can kill. Did you remark the amount of precipitation in that bottle, Watson? It should not be there, and there are marks of sediment in the glass. Somebody added more colchicum to the bottle, and made this gout remedy a poisonous drink."

I looked again at the bottle. "Holmes, you are right. But how—"

"That is what we must discover. And colchicum is bitter, the first taste should have warned Sir Charles." He turned to Lord Rivington. "I take it that Plan X and the memorandum were kept in the dressing-room bureau. The lock has been picked skillfully, but scratches show under the magnifying glass. Perhaps we may now talk to Lady Mulready."

The widow was a tall, stately grey-haired lady. Lord Rivington called her Ilse, and she spoke to him as Gerald. She greeted Holmes warmly.

"Mr. Holmes, I know what Lord Rivington believes, but I can

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assure you he is wrong. I am a German and proud of my ancestry, and I know my husband's equal pride in being British. Some terrible mistake has been made."

"I believe we shall find an explanation that will be entirely honorable to his name. If you could tell me what happened yesterday after his return from Whitehall, I should be grateful."

"My husband told me little or nothing of political affairs. When he returned home, I could see that he was upset, but he said nothing of the cause and I had learned that it was useless to ask. He remained in his private rooms until dinner. We were five at table, our children, Hans and Lilian, and M. Calamy making up the rest of the party. It was not a cheerful meal. My husband's gout was troubling him and he hardly spoke, except when Lilian provoked him by speaking of some suffragette meeting she had attended. Hans seemed preoccupied and M. Calamy was concerned, as always, with his food."

A fleeting smile crossed her face. "We live simply here. My husband did not care what he ate, and the years have reconciled me to English cooking, but M. Calamy cannot endure it. He has brought his chef as well as his valet, but although his meals are specially prepared he still grumbles. So he did last night. After dinner, my husband called me aside and said, 'I have painful decisions to make, Ilse, and I fear the result will cause you grief.' Those were his last words to me."

"When was the tragedy discovered?"

"At three o'clock this morning, I heard cries coming from my husband's room. I went in and found him in terrible pain. Dr. Cardew was summoned immediately, but by the time he arrived Charles was in a coma and he could do nothing. The end came just after seven."

"Were your son and daughter present?"

"Lilian, yes. Hans—" She hesitated. "It proved almost impossible to rouse him and, when at last the housemaid did so, he staggered, as though under the influence of drink. Coming from his room to his father's, he slipped, fell down several stairs, and, as it proved, broke his ankle. He had to be carried back to bed, and Dr. Cardew says he must stay in his room."

"A last question, and I have done. You said your husband didn't care what he ate. Was there a special reason for that?"

"Yes. A nasal operation a few years ago almost deprived him of taste and smell, so that he could barely distinguish chicken from beef or claret from brandy. Surely that cannot be important?"

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"It is one piece in the jigsaw, no more."

Outside the drawing room, we were met by a young girl. It was easy to see this was Ilse Mulready's daughter, although there was a light in her eye and a spring in her step that her mother lacked. She held out an envelope. "Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Sherlock Holmes? Here is a letter for you."

Holmes looked at the envelope, tore it open, read it, and passed it to me. Some words were printed in capitals on a single sheet of paper:

MISTER HOLMES GO AWAY
YOUR PRESENTS HERE IS UNNECCESARY

"Written with a Waverley nib on a standard Ranelagh-weave paper," Holmes said. "Was this delivered by hand, Miss Mulready?"

"No, one of the footmen found it on the hall table. What does it say?" Holmes showed it to her, and she flushed. "I think he's right. Of course, I am sorry my father is dead, but he should be allowed to rest in peace. I know he died because he was a man of war, as you are, Lord Rivington. He hated poor Hans, because Hans had no interest in fighting and killing people. I heard them arguing last night in Father's room."

"And what was the subject?"

"I don't know. And if I did, I shouldn't tell you." She turned away from us and ran upstairs. Lord Rivington coughed, hummed under his breath, said nothing.

"Surely this note is important, Holmes," I said. "It was obviously written by somebody almost illiterate."

"Or somebody who wants us to think so. Or—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of a gentleman dressed with rather too obvious elegance, his hair glossy, his beard wonderfully neat. My feeling that there is something unmanly about the French is reinforced by their use of pomades and perfumes. This, of course, was M. Calamy, who now expressed his regrets to Lord Rivington, smiling as he did so.

"Perhaps after this tragedy our negotiations should be given up—postponed, as you say."

"Not at all." Lord Rivington spoke sharply. "They are more than ever urgent, and I shall take charge of them in person."

"That will make me happy. We shall, of course, conduct them on both sides with entire frankness." The Frenchman's smile perhaps

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broadened a little. "Later today I move from this house of sorrow to our Embassy."

"With your staff?" Lord Rivington said with heavy irony.

"My valet, my chef, what should I do without them?" He bowed slightly and was gone. The Secretary for War muttered something, among which I thought I heard the words "primping popinjay."

Holmes looked after him with a puzzled air, then stood deep in thought. Lord Rivington said impatiently, "Mr. Holmes, this is no time for brooding."

"I beg your pardon. I agree, Plan X must be returned to you at once."

"You know where it is?" the Secretary for War said in astonishment.

"It was an elementary problem."

Holmes asked a maid to take us to Mr. Hans's room. As we walked up the great stairs and down a long passage, Holmes murmured to me, "Nevertheless, Watson, there is something I do not understand."

We found the son of the house on a sofa, one foot heavily bandaged. He was a good-looking young fellow with delicate, almost pretty features, but at this moment they were taut with anguish. A bowl of flowers stood on a window ledge beside him and Holmes picked it up.

"The autumn crocus," he said musingly. "A charming but dangerous flower."

The young man started, then said, "Before God, Mr. Holmes, I never intended—"

"I am prepared to believe you, but I am not your judge. Let me tell you what I think happened and you can say how nearly it approaches the truth."

He turned to us. "Hans here is one of those unfortunate people with a strong feminine streak that leads them into dubious, even criminal associations. Such deviations have touched our own Royal family—you will recall the need to hush up the scandal of the noble visitors to the male brothel in Cleveland Street. The German Intelligence department became aware of Hans's propensities and they have been blackmailing him. He has abstracted documents from his stepfather's bureau, copied, and then returned them. When you, Lord Rivington, told Sir Charles what had happened, he knew who the culprit must be."

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The young man wrung his hands. "They threatened to expose me. I would have gone to prison. What else could I do?"

"You should have told your stepfather," Holmes said sternly. "I come to the events of last night. Sir Charles called you to his room. I don't know what he said, perhaps that you must leave the country, but it made you desperate. You had sufficient medical knowledge to know that colchicum was in your stepfather's medicine, and that it is easily distilled from the autumn crocus. Perhaps you prepared it then, perhaps you had some already prepared for just such an emergency. You added it to the medicine."

"It was to make sure he slept soundly. I swear I never meant him to die."

"I don't suppose you did. A little medical knowledge may be not merely dangerous but fatal. Otherwise, your scheme worked well enough. You took the papers, I suppose meaning to copy and return them. Why did you not do so?"

"Because I was drugged. All you say is true, Mr. Holmes, but can you explain what happened to me? When I knew my stepfather would be asleep, I went to his dressing room and took the plan and the memorandum—the bureau drawer was easy to open, I had done it before. I brought them in here to copy and return them, and then I was going to post the copy at once. But I was too sleepy, my fingers wouldn't move over the paper. I put the papers away and fell asleep, and when I was woken I felt so dizzy I could hardly stand. It was because of the dizziness that I fell and broke my ankle." He gestured at the bandages. "Then Dr. Cardew gave me an opiate and I slept until ten o'clock this morning. Now I am told not to move."

"The papers are still here?" Lord Rivington cried. "Then if you want a chance of saving your villainous skin, tell me where they are."

"In that bookcase," the young man said sullenly. "Behind the top row of books, on the right."

Lord Rivington went to the bookcase, took out some books in the top row, put his hand in, took out more books, and turned with a furious face. "There is nothing here! What trick are you trying to play?"

"Nothing?" I have never seen a ghastlier look of fear and apprehension on a man's face. "Impossible." He shrank back as Lord Rivington approached him threateningly.

"Wait," Sherlock Holmes said in an imperative tone. "Something is wrong here, there is something I have not understood." He paced

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up and down the room while the rest of us watched. "Did you write a card saying my presence here was unnecessary? I thought not, yet it came from within the house. Last night you all ate the same food at dinner?"

"Except M. Calamy. His food is specially prepared by his chef."

"And afterwards?"

"My stepfather left us. Coffee was served, but my digestion is poor. I always have a cup of chocolate."

"A cup of chocolate, yes. And M. Calamy was very pleased with himself. I have been stupid, Watson."

"Holmes, I don't know what you're talking about." I could see from Lord Rivington's expression that he was similarly bewildered.

"The card, Watson, the card. It was a Frenchman's English misspelling. But quick, there is not a moment to lose, he is leaving."

"M. Calamy?"

"The man who drugged the cup of chocolate—his so-called chef."

We found him in a servants' bedroom under the eaves, packing his bag for departure. He did not seem surprised to see us.

"Ah, Monsieur Holmes. Here is what you look for." A large envelope lay on the bed. "The excellent Plan X, and the other paper."

"Which you have copied."

"Precisely, *mon cher*. Now Britain and France have no secrets from each other, we can be entirely frank in discussion."

"It was you who sent me the postcard."

"My spelling, she is not of the best, but that is so."

"You drugged the chocolate, and then took the documents."

"On behalf of la belle France. I am called the good M. Calamy's chef, but he gets the indigestion from my cooking." He chuckled. "I make my investigation, and soon understand that the young Hans is—like your Oscar Wilde, shall we say?—and is responsible for what has happened. And I see things are, as you say, coming to the head, so I arrange for the young Hans to have a little harmless sleep while I take possession of Plan X and the memorandum. No harm is done—except to our friend Sir Charles. That is a great tragedy."

He was an odd-looking little fellow, very short, his head a perfect egg shape. His hair was very black and parted in the middle, his moustaches long and pointed. He wore patent-leather shoes. He looked like a perfect musical-comedy Frenchman.

"You are an agent of the French government," Holmes said rather stiffly.

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"At the moment that is so, but I am like yourself a private detective. It is truly an honor to meet the greatest detective in Britain."

Holmes rarely smiled but he did so then, although his smile vanished at the little man's next words.

"I am myself the greatest detective in Europe. My name is—"

The narrative ends here, so that the pseudo-chef's identity remains uncertain. The scandal of Sir Charles's death was evidently hushed up. Hans Mulready had in later life a successful stage career as a female impersonator.

"Did Sherlock Holmes Meet Hercule—" —illustrated with wood engravings by John dePol—will be published in a limited edition of 200 copies by The Yellow Barn Press in February.

On our January cover will be Frank Langella as Sherlock Holmes, now at New York's Nederlander Theater in "Sherlock's Last Case" by Charles Morowitz.

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EQMM READERS AWARD

As most of you know, the second EQMM Readers Award was presented in May of this year to Clark Howard, who won the first EQMM Readers Award in 1986. Unfortunately, Mr. Howard has been too busy this past year working on a new novel to send us a story and so he will not be a candidate for pulling off a hat trick this year as far as the EQMM Readers Award is concerned—but he *has* promised to write more stories as soon as he has the proper time.

You have no dearth of wonderful stories to choose from for the third annual Readers Award, however—over 150 stories published in the thirteen issues of EQMM dated January through Mid-December 1987. The indices in the June 1987 and this issue should prove helpful, if necessary, in reminding you of the title of the story that made the greatest impression on you of any you read in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* this year.

We'd love to honor your favorite story with a big vote for its author, so do vote accurately so that your vote will count. On page 78, write in the name of the story and its author in the space provided. If you can't recall a story by the title or author, describe the story line as briefly as you can—and the issue it appeared in, if you can remember that. *Vote for one story only and send this page from the magazine as your ballot to the address on page 78 by December 31. Photocopies, or ballots listing more than one choice, will be disqualified.*

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The EQMM Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1988 issue. If you are eager to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized envelope with your name and address, with your request, to us at the address below. We will have counted the votes by late January.

My selection for the 1987 EQMM Readers Award is

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

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MURDER BY DICE
by MATTHEW J. COSTELLO

I've only witnessed a murder once.

I was staying at the Interlaken Inn in Connecticut, a cozy modern establishment catering to skiers and to parents visiting their away-from-home preppies. The schedule called for a weekend symposium on magic led by Thelma Crowley.

After a festive welcoming cocktail party on Friday night, everyone adjourned for a tasty banquet while our hostess, Ms. Crowley, proceeded to mumble some magical words of welcome. Later, a magic chest was wheeled out and placed at the front of the room. I was midway through my entree (a rather nice steak) when a detective burst in through the door.

"Who called about a murder?" he yelled out.

"I did!" a woman cried. "I'm a medium and I saw the murder of—Thelma Crowley!"

The diners gasped.

"Where's the corpse?" the detective inquired.

"In there!" The woman gestured dramatically, pointing at the chest. "Thelma Crowley's body is in that chest, locked from the inside."

"Delicious," I said to my companion.

"The steak?" she asked.

"No, the murder. It's a new twist on the old locked-room mystery."

And before the weekend was out, there would be other twists, including fist fights and magic tricks. For this was a Murder To Go weekend, and the hunt was on to find out who murdered Thelma Crowley.

David Landau created Murder To Go in 1982 as a participatory mystery. While he prefers staging his mysteries for more intimate gatherings, he has run them for as many as a thousand people, at the Consumer Electronics Show. He has staged mysteries on the *Queen Elizabeth II*, at the Bahama Princess Hotel, and at a classic seashore mansion. For people who like to play at sleuthing, it can be the ultimate murder game.

Landau has inspired many imitators, including a mystery cruise out of Los Angeles from Tops in Tours and a murder weekend at the hotel used in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* from Murder by the Book.

There are also home versions. Called "party murders," they supply everything except the friends and the dip.

Murder Mystery Party's newest releases, *Konan Castle's Revenge* and *Death in St. James Park*, come with invitations, appropriate recipes, and the murder weapon. A recording gives the players the background of the crime and other evidence is found in clue packets.

Party Zones Games also supplies a party-in-the-box. *Knave of Hearts* is

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for six men and six women, who take the roles of high-society people (that is, if they aren't high-society people already) lounging at a fancy party on the Cote d'Azur *circa* 1948. Money's important in this game, as guests have to pay exorbitant fees to purchase tips from the host and hostess.

Murder Mystery Party Games also let hosts play in the mysteries, which range from skullduggery at a ski resort to a Roman escapade that leads to death in the catacombs.

For a less threatening party, nothing could be better than *Clue II—Murder in Disguise* (Parker Brothers). A follow-up to 1985's *VCR Clue, Clue II* takes the incredibly guilty-looking Clue stalwarts—Mr. Green, Miss Scarlet, Colonel Mustard, and the rest—and sets them against the romantic backdrops of Paris, Tangier, and Rangoon. The game uses card play to keep everyone marshaling their clues until someone is ready to accuse the murderer.

Ellery Queen's Operation Murder (Spinnaker Software, Inc.) is another VCR mystery game. It begins with a 30-minute tape depicting the murder of Abby Doorn. There are plenty of suspects, ranging from her loving (?) daughter to the brilliant Dr. Janney. A neat twist here is that Abby is discovered to be murdered as she's about to undergo emergency surgery. With 256 possible endings, this game can be enjoyed many times.

There is also a clever Ellery Queen board game, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Game* (Mayfair Games). It provides two boards to play on, one depicting New York and the other Bromlee Station. Depending upon the case, players can visit a variety of locations to uncover clues. Restaurants, hotels, libraries, and banks may all hold crucial information. Players can work together or race each other to be the first with the solution. When you've solved all the cases in the game, new mysteries are available in *The Casebook of Nick Velvet,* featuring four new mysteries.

In *Murder She Wrote* (Warren Company, Inc.), players not only have to solve a murder, they have to prevent someone else from being killed. Time can be crucial, and if it takes too long for your deductive reasoning to kick in, there may be no witnesses left to save.

Gumshoe (Sleuth Publications Ltd.) uses a similar system to the award-winning *Sherlock Holmes—Consulting Detective. Gumshoe* brilliantly recreates the era of the hard-boiled detective of the Thirties. The game is a veritable treasure box for mystery fans, with a fingerprint and photographic file (with instructions on how to read a print), copies of a San Francisco newspaper, *The Call Bulletin,* autopsy reports, and a classified telephone directory. A map is included to plan investigations of the cases, which can take you from Nob Hill to the underworld of Chinatown in 1934.

A classic mystery board game, *221-B Baker Street* (John N. Hanson Company, Inc.), has been turned into an entertaining computer game. In *221-B Baker Street, the Computer Game* (Datasoft), one to four players can tackle 30 cases worthy of Holmes and Watson. There are secret tunnels to take shortcuts to locations in London, and each player has a secret code that can keep his/her clues away from the prying eyes of other sleuths.

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Killed Until Dead (Accolade) offers more contemporary crime solving, with a gallery of suspects you can interrogate and spy on with videotape equipment. Solve the murder by midnight or you'll become prey to the murderer yourself.

Then there's *Maniac Mansion* (Actavision), a mystery of a more whimsical sort and delightful to play. It's a mixture of mystery, horror, and a teenage movie from the Fifties. Players have to select some of the "gang" (ranging from brainy nerds to dunderheaded jocks) to rescue Betty, who's been kidnaped. The mansion she's trapped in is filled with classic tricks from countless pre-*film noir* mysteries. The key to the mansion is hidden—surely you know where. And you open a secret drawer by going to the staircase and pushing— But I give too much away.

With lifelike graphics, the game allows you to move each of the three members of the rescue party independently. Cooperation between them, though, is essential, or you'll find yourself losing more than one of the guys to any of the many traps. (Don't worry about the chainsaw in the kitchen, though, and all that red stuff. It's only ketchup—I think.)

Lucasfilm Games produced *Maniac Mansion* and is also working on the next evolutionary step in games, a step that will provide a real-life mystery adventure. It's called DVI, and according to Lucasfilm's game designer, Noah Falstein, it may lead the way to some super games. DVI is a digital video disk that you can interact with. You could, for example, be watching a cocktail party in some posh parlor when one of the characters turns to you and asks you something. Now you've got to respond, and depending upon your response you might discover a clue or merely receive a pleasantry. At its best, a DVI game could be like a move that you'd control.

But that's still years away. Until then, any of the games listed here should provide more than enough mystery for even the most accomplished amateur sleuth.

Accolade: 20813 Stevens Creek Boulevard, Cupertino, CA 95014
Actavision: P.O. Box 72887, Mountain View, CA 94039
Datasoft: 12808 Nordhoff Place, Chatsworth, CA 91311
John N. Hanson Company, Inc.: 369 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030
Mayfair Games: P.O. Box 48539, Niles, IL 60648
Murder by the Book: 1825 Linden Way, Denver, CO 80224
Murder Mystery Party Games: University Games, 4055 Bohannon Drive, Menlo Park, CA 94025
Murder To Go: 496 Hudson Street, Suite 144, New York, NY 10014
Parker Brothers: 50 Dunham Road, Beverly, MA 01915
Party Zones Games: TSR, P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI 53147-0756
Sleuth Publications Ltd.: 2814 19th Street, San Francisco, CA 94110
Spinnaker Software, Inc.: 1 Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA 02139
Tops in Tours: 22030 Ventura Boulevard, Woodland Hills, CA 91364
Warren Company, Inc.: 3200 South Street, Lafayette, IN 47903

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a *NEW* Scheherazadian tale by

JAMES POWELL

The Padishah let drop the capon he had just bitten into and, chewing, glared at the poet with tiny, calculating eyes. The glutton was ever eating. Indeed the holy Mullah Muzafar and the devout of the realm feared the man might singlehandedly bring about the terrible Dawn Without Cockcrow, the silent herald of the Day of Judgment. "So be it," said the ruler at last. But he added this warning. "In ten years, my donkey speaks or you will repay me everything with your own life's blood . . ."

THE TALKING DONKEY

by JAMES POWELL

My masters, you have all heard the story of the foolish Padishah of ancient Persia, who possessed a donkey of which he was so fond that he offered great wealth to anyone who could teach the animal to talk. "For then," he said, "I can make it my Vizier."

Of course, no one accepted this challenge until Abu Nesradin, the poet, approached the Couch of Authority to declare that, yes, he would teach the animal to talk. But he set down certain conditions. First, he must be given ten years to complete the instruction. Furthermore, during this time he must be provided with an apartment in the palace, servants to feed and care for himself and his four-legged pupil, and an allowance of gold so that he might devote himself entirely to the donkey's instruction.

The ruler's face resembled a small, astonished moon reflected on a sea of jowl. He let drop the capon he had just bitten into and, chewing, glared at the poet with tiny, calculating eyes. (The glutton was ever eating. Indeed the holy Mullah Muzafar and the devout of the realm feared the man might singlehandedly bring about the

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terrible Dawn Without Cockcrow, that silent herald of the Day of Judgment.) "So be it," said the Padishah at last. But he added this warning. "In ten years, my donkey speaks or you will repay me everything with your own life's blood."

The poet bowed and left the royal presence. But a friend who had been among the bystanders in the audience hall overtook him on the broad palace staircase and admonished him for having taken on such an impossible job. Abu Nesradin only stroked his beard and smiled. "The ship of my soul has found an easy haven for the next ten years," he said, for this was the way he thought poets should talk. "Instead of wasting my days laboring for some noble lord in need of a flattering couplet, I can now give all my time to my art. I might even achieve the dream of poets since the days of Hakim the Barber, Father of Odesters, and discover a rhyme for 'scissors.' "

"And when your ten years have passed, what then?"

"One of three things might well come to pass in ten years," said the poet. "The Padishah might die. Or the donkey might die. Or Abu Nesradin might die." Then he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and said, "And failing that, perhaps the Almighty in His mercy might take pity on me and give the animal the power of speech."

This story you well know, my masters. But now let me tell you how the poet used this gift of years and what happened when he had spent them, each and every one.

Good fortune is a suit of new clothes that loses a half portion of its worth if it cannot be worn among those who know the wearer. So it became the poet's custom to walk through the streets of the city in the cool of the late afternoon with Zazu, as the Padishah's donkey was called, clip-clopping behind him. Zazu was a most gentle animal, with dainty hooves and the brownest of eyes that looked out at you as if it wanted to tell you something. As they passed through the bazaar, it pleased Abu Nesradin to stop here and there to ask a price or examine an item of merchandise. Putting on his best schoolmasterly air, he would then turn to Zazu and, carefully shaping his words, proclaim loudly, "Highway robbery" or "Shoddy goods." Where the long-faced merchants of the bazaar would have grabbed their cudgels and driven off any poet who dared to say such things, the Tutor of the Padishah's Donkey was quite another matter. All they could do was expel their breath through noisy, exasperated lips.

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Abu Nesradin also liked to visit his favorite coffeehouse, where his friends would greet Zazu with warmth and elaborate courtesy. (Those who did not count themselves among the poet's friends were wise to leave when he entered or risk being pointed to when Zazu was taught words like "rogue" or "mountebank.") As these coffeehouse visits grew longer, Abu Nesradin justified them by Zazu's need to learn the popular idiom. But, in fact, the coffeehouse was popular with the merchants from the distant caravans and the poet enjoyed eavesdropping on the exotic stories they told, for he was sure a rhyme for "scissors" did exist in some corner of the world. Anything that came close, he added to a list he kept.

But as the months stretched into years, those who loved the poet tired of watching him waste the time fortune had given him and began taking their coffee elsewhere.

Undaunted, Abu Nesradin turned to his colleagues, the other officers of the court, who could not refuse the company of the Tutor of the Padishah's Donkey. These included the Commander of the Palace Cavalry, who spent his time admiring his reflection wherever he could find it; the Royal Tax Collector, a humpback who spat through his teeth and wore the halfwit smile of a man who dreams of your money in his purse; the Court Chamberlain, with a scrawny neck and a quick bright eye for lapses of protocol; and assorted junior functionaries—small fry with herdlike alarms and amusements. Abu Nesradin might have kept the company of this dull, uncultured lot had he not found it amusing to go on about what he could do once he'd taught the donkey to talk.

"Perhaps I'll teach a peacock to ride horseback so the Padishah can make him Commander of the Palace Cavalry," he mused. "Or train a camel to palm coins so he can be Royal Tax Collector." This set the Court Chamberlain cackling with amusement until Abu Nesradin spoke of how easily chickens might be taught to pilfer from the palace larder.

Thus it was that the poet, having off-loaded all his friends, trimmed the ship of his soul by taking on a considerable cargo of enemies. And none was more dangerous than the Vizier Tarik, whose place Zazu was supposed to take. Now this whole talking-donkey business had been born out of the Padishah's vexation with the eternally dour and humorless Tarik.

"If my Zazu could only talk," the ruler insisted, "then it could certainly learn to sing and dance and I would have a Vizier who could entertain the Padishah between courses."

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Tarik smiled coldly at this. But no one else in the audience hall dared to laugh. The Vizier was much feared—he was the font of a multitude of schemes all aimed at increasing his own power and wealth. The man's avarice was legendary. He wore a large diamond in a ring on his finger, for he loved these stones above all others. A new court officer was wise to make a gift of a diamond to obtain his good will. In place of such a gift, Abu Nesradin, who was not wise, had circulated the following verse:

" 'Mid Padishahs and palaces and midnight Viziers
What wakes me? Snip. Snip.
The spider trims his web with silent scissors."

So terrible was the Viziers-scissors rhyme that the poet's muse fled the quarterdeck of his soul, vowing never to return. ("So be it," Abu Nesradin had declared proudly. "Then I will be captain of that soul myself. I will be the master of my fate.") But the Vizier's enemies delighted in the lines and began to use a snipping motion with index and middle finger as sign and countersign amongst themselves. From that day forward, Tarik hated the poet and marked him down as one to be made an example of when the time was right. Meanwhile, the Vizier contented himself with never letting the Padishah forget what a poor bargain he had made with the poet.

So it was that as the years flew by, the Tutor of the Padishah's Donkey found himself alone and without friends—except, of course, for Zazu. The little animal was his only consolation. And always it seemed to the poet that the animal was trying to tell him something. When he said regretfully, "How terrible a weapon it is, this tongue the Padishah would have me bestow upon you, O Zazu!" he swore the donkey nodded as if it understood. When he spoke of his loneliness, he heard the creature sigh. And when the poet was extravagant in his cups, Zazu's delicate bray would join his laughter and the beast would stand slightly cockeyed, for its tutor was not above adding a goblet of date wine to its oats.

Time passed, as it always does. Abu Nesradin's interest in the Padishah's state of health quickened with the years. But in spite of his abuses of the table, the ruler remained as pink and prosperous as a monstrous baby. And Zazu continued to be a picture of donkey fitness. In fact, the date wine seemed to have worked wonders for the animal's coat. For his own part, the desperate poet began carrying a mirror about with him so he could examine his tongue and

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the whites of his eyes. He cursed his own well being and the rashness that had driven him to make the fatal bargain with the Padishah.

But the tenth and final year of his term of office began on a hopeful note. In the back of a collection of tawdry adventure stories written on the cheapest vellum, Abu Nesradin found an announcement for a course which guaranteed to make him the center of attention at social gatherings by teaching him in ten easy lessons how to throw his voice. The poet had visions of himself drinking a glass of water while Zazu would seem to say, "Good afternoon, Great Padishah, my brother," in a falsetto voice. But on arrival, these ten easy lessons required more time, patience, and palate dexterity than a man with his execution bearing down on him at top speed could bring to them.

What the poet needed was a clever bit of work to save his skin. He spent many hours pacing in the palace garden with one hand on his elbow and the other on his chin while Zazu clip-clopped patiently at his heels. The more he paced, the more he became aware of a change around him. Nobles and officers were arriving from every corner of the realm as if gathering for some great festival. People he had not seen since he insulted them back at the beginning of his term as Tutor to the Padishah's Donkey now reappeared in large numbers.

And how happy and expectant they all seemed! Sworn enemies walked arm in arm, exchanging stories. Families with generations of bad blood between them greeted each other like close relatives. Such fellowship only served to make the poet's loneliness complete.

"See, O Zazu," he exclaimed, "this is how mankind should live in friendship together, sharing common joys and purposes! How I envy—" Abu Nesradin stopped. He had suddenly realized it was the tenth anniversary of his bargain with the Padishah which had brought so many to court. The poet's heart ached and he considered steering the ship of his soul onto the reef of self-destruction.

On the eve of the day of reckoning, Abu Nesradin and Zazu walked together amid the flowers and fountains for what the poet was certain would be the last time. How he regretted he had not just ridden out the city gate on the little donkey and never returned. He might have traveled to faroff Cathay. Among the stories the merchants of the distant caravans told about dragons' entrails and the strange falling sicknesses of heathen rulers, there had been the tale of how an Emperor of Cathay and his entire court had once been defrauded by a gang of confidence men posing as tailors. Yes, Cathay sounded

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like a land where a muse-abandoned poet might have made a living by his wits.

While Abu Nesradin was regretting what might have been, a nightingale in a sycamore tree uttered its glorious evening hymn of praise to the Almighty, a hymn which the infidel in his ignorance hears as a mere love song to the moon. Suddenly the poet stopped in his tracks, and the ambling donkey butted into him.

"Listen, O Zazu!" shouted Abu Nesradin. "Here is what I will tell the Padishah and his court. I will announce that the Almighty has worked a miracle. Just as He gave the nightingale its song to edify the devout, so has He now given you the power of speech. When you speak, the true believer will understand you, but the infidel, in his ignorance, will only hear a donkey's bray. All this I will announce so cleverly that no one will dare admit they cannot understand what you are saying."

Laughing to himself, Abu Nesradin threw his arm across the donkey's neck and together they went back down the path.

Had the poet stirred himself from his prideful thoughts to look back at the next turning, he might have seen the shape of a man at the palace window overlooking the spot where he and Zazu had just been standing. And he might have seen a diamond gleam like an evening star as the shape at the window raised a hand to stroke his beard. And the poet, too, might have watched the blind Mullah Muzafar mount the steps of the minaret beyond the garden wall to give the day's last call to prayer.

The next day, the Padishah's audience hall was full to bursting with military officers in their most dashing uniforms and the court nobles and the merchants of the bazaar in their brightest robes. A hush of smiles fell across the room as Abu Nesradin entered with Zazu clip-clopping behind him on a golden halter. The Padishah was stretched out on the Throne of Pillows, eating from dishes arranged before him. He signaled tutor and pupil to approach, gesturing with a morsel of dove breast impaled on his knife point.

"You find me in a good humor, Mr. Poet," said the ruler. "So if you have failed in the task you took upon yourself, if my Zazu cannot talk, then admit it here and now. I will then show mercy by having you executed with a single stroke of the blade."

"Zazu can talk, Sire," smiled Abu Nesradin. "But before you hear that for yourself, I would first like to explain the holy miracle which has taken place."

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"I was advised you might attempt to pay me back all my gold with empty words," said the ruler, making a sign to the royal executioner. That fierce gentleman partially unrolled a black-wool carpet at his feet to reveal an hourglass which he stood upright, starting the sand to fall from top to bottom.

"Now you may talk of miracles until the cows come home," said the Padishah, "but if, when all is said and done, my little Zazu cannot talk, then the time marked there in that glass shall tell us how long you shall take to die." At another sign, the executioner rolled out the rest of the carpet to reveal a collection of knives of assorted shapes and sizes. Slow death was the executioner's specialty, a skinning-alive that began at the soles of the victim's feet.

Abu Nesradin swallowed hard and struggled to maintain his smile. The crowd sighed with pleasure and settled back for a long audience. Then the curtains parted at the left of the Throne of Pillows and the Vizier Tarik emerged, leading by the hand the Mullah Muzafar. In that moment, the poet knew he was lost. This blind holy man, the Leader of the Devout throughout all Persia, was a soul completely without guile or contrivance. He would not be swayed by clever words. When Zazu brayed, he would hear nothing but a bray and say just that.

As the Mullah was being led to his place near the Couch of Authority, Abu Nesradin noted that the Vizier was not wearing his favorite diamond ring. But then the poet saw it on the executioner's finger. That formidable gentleman was turning the ring as though recalling to himself why it had been given him. Abu Nesradin's face fell.

In the act of filling his royal mouth with food, the Padishah read the poet's expression correctly and began a snuffling laugh. His dancing jowls were a signal to the entire audience hall. Laughter at the poet's distress broke out on all sides. The merchants from the bazaar whinnied merrily. The Commander of the Palace Cavalry and his officers shrieked with pleasure and displayed their uniforms to the fullest advantage. The Royal Tax Collector smiled and spat. The Court Chamberlain and his subchamberlains cackled with delight and the assorted court small fry bleated out their pleasure at being allowed to participate in such a happy event. Even Tarik allowed himself a muffled laugh a spider Vizier might have envied.

Through the racket, Abu Nesradin could hear the sand fall in the hourglass grain by grain. His mind raced to no purpose. He licked his lips and looked around at the Padishah, the Vizier, and the

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laughing audience. But suddenly he started, for he felt a familiar hand on the rudder of the ship of his soul. His muse had returned to him!

"My Lord," he said, "before we get to the miracle of which I spoke, let me tell you a story."

Responding as one man, the audience shouted, "May it be a long story!" Smiling, the Padishah gestured to the poet to take as much time as he chose.

"Sire," said Abu Nesradin, "in faroff Frangistan where the heathen dwells, there was once a King who like his father and grandfather before him was a practitioner of the magical arts. He lived in the highest tower of a half ruined castle atop a windswept hill. Study was meat and drink to him and he spent every waking hour among his ancient, brass-bound volumes of magical lore. For three seasons of each year, he saw nothing of his subjects or they of him. But when the north winds blew down to lock up the earth with winter's iron key, once a day the King's people would gather at the castle gate, where he would provide food for them from the royal storehouse with his own hand.

"Each year, it troubled the King that his people looked so shabby, pinched, and worn with care. He marveled how, year after year, their children kept to that truculent, awkward age forever between innocence and maturity. One day as he watched his guests bicker over their food and hop from one foot to another against the cold, he resolved to find a spell among his books to build a high wall of brass all around his kingdom to shut out the north winds of winter.

"After a diligent search, the King found what he was looking for. Overjoyed, he went to the window in the tower and pronounced the spell in a loud, firm voice. Instantly, a fine wall of brass sprang up around the kingdom. It stood wind high, yet low enough to allow clouds, sun, and moon to pass overhead. Anxious to announce to his people the banishment of winter from the kingdom, he hurried down the tower steps and out through the castle gate, beyond which he had never gone before. The early-summer countryside was strange and marvelous to him. He followed a well worn path between prosperous fields to the nearest village. There he discovered well thatched houses of the loftiest and airiest kind. And were these his people, singing and dancing in the brightest and handsomest of clothes? And whose were those laughing, red-cheeked children flying wonderful kites and flapping their arms as they ran across the grass? Where were the tattered clothes, the sad, bickering faces these peo-

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ple wore when they came for his charity? Where were the ungainly children now? All this disturbed the King, and he turned away, forgetting why he'd come.

"I rule a two-faced people, he told himself angrily. They keep their happy side for themselves and their tragic for me. I don't have subjects, I have winter birds. Well, then, birds they shall be!

"This was no idle threat, for while dipping into *The Golden Treasure-Trove of Holy Conjury* during his search for the brass-wall spell, the King had come across the words to change people into what they really are. Before compassion could overtake him, he hurried back to his tower, carried the great book to the window, and shouted out the spell across his land.

"A sudden, joyful song rang out from all over his kingdom and hosts of birds of every size and color rose up into the air, came together in a great assembly, circled the King's tower once, and flew off out of sight beyond the wall of brass. As the King watched them go, a fat little bird with a yellow breast marked with a black V landed on the window ledge. Somehow it resembled the fussy little alderman with tarnished chain who gave pathetic little speeches of appreciation for the King's winter charity each year.

" 'O King, let me tell you a story before I rejoin my people,' said the little bird. 'Once, long ago, there lived a young scholar whose suit for the hand of the daughter of a distant king had been denied because of his low station in life. Cast down, the young man fled like a crow from the face of man until, deep in the wilderness, he found these very ruins and in this selfsame tower the library of a magician long dead. So it was that he set about to make himself master of the magical arts. But he was not a hermit by nature, nor could he forget the woman he loved.

" 'Now, among his dusty books he had happened upon a copy of that cursed book, *The Jinn's Black Hexagram*. One day, as he leafed through its foul pages while sitting at the tower window, the young scholar discovered the spell to change things into what they are not. Since I already have the castle, surely all I lack to be a king worthy of my princess are subjects to rule over, he said to himself as he watched the birds swoop and fill the air with their song. That night, as a thunderstorm crashed around the darkened tower, the young scholar muttered the spell—for that is how Jinn incantations must be spoken and in darkness. The next morning, all the birds for miles around awoke to find they had been transformed into human beings.'

"Here the little bird shuddered and shook its head. 'Imagine a

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butterfly having to go back to crawling in the dust like a caterpillar,' it said. 'That's what the creatures of the air felt like. My alderman great-grandfather, shamed though he was to appear without feathers before the Almighty, felt it his duty to speak for our people. So he threw himself on his knees to ask that this terrible curse be lifted from them. In an instant, an angel was standing before him, a great shining man with wings of fire.

" ' "The Almighty has sent me to tell you a story," announced the angel.

" ' "I'd rather been hoping for something more than that," said my great-grandfather.

" 'The angel shrugged his wings. (Oh, how Great-grandfather envied the angel those wings!) Then, rolling his eyes skyward as if to help him remember, the angel told this story.

" ' "One day a sheep who belonged to a flock on the sunny side of the mountain received a letter telling him that his father, who belonged to a flock over on the shady side, was seriously ill and wished to see him before he died. The sheep hurried to the shepherd, who agreed he should leave at once on the two-day journey.

" ' "But there were wolves in the area. Only the night before, the shepherd had killed a large one which tried to attack the flock. So the shepherd took the skin from the dead wolf and tied it onto the sheep in the hope that it might offer it some protection.

" ' "Clad in the wolfskin, the sheep set out on its journey. But it was a thoughtless animal and had not traveled far before it fell in with a pack of wolves. Now, the wolf the shepherd killed had been the leader of this very same pack. Thinking the sheep to be their chief come back to them, the wolves greeted it happily and immediately fell under its authority. The sheep led them farther up the mountain and taught them how to eat grass.

" ' "That night, the moon was full. But when they all gathered on the mountaintop to howl, their leader taught them how to bleat at the moon instead. The next day found the sheep leading the pack of wolves down the mountainside, all grazing and bleating as they went. By day's end, the sheep, delighted with its pupils' progress, decided to teach them how to gambol, the only thing they lacked to be perfect sheep. The wolves took to bounding and skipping about rather slowly at first, but soon they were gamboling in fine fashion.

" ' "So pleased with itself was their foolish teacher for converting the pack to the vegetarian camp that it gave a tremendous leap of joy. This effort broke the cord that held on the wolfskin. In much

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less time than it took them to become sheep, the wolves became wolves again. They fell on the sheep and ate it down.

" 'The angel stopped and examined the moons of his fingernails. "That was the story I was sent to tell you."

" ' "What do you think it means?" demanded my puzzled great-grandfather.

" ' "If you ask me," said the angel, "it means it's better to be an angel than a man or a bird. If you ask me, that's what all the Almighty's stories mean." '

"Here the little bird on the window ledge ended its narrative.

"The King in the tower looked down and asked, 'And what did your great-grandfather think the story meant?'

" 'He told my grandfather that we'd been hatched once before and ought not be surprised if it happened again. He said it was the meat in the egg that mattered. My grandfather, who had more time to think about it, said it meant we mustn't live our lives as if we're going to be walking around on Earth forever. My father, who was not a thoughtful man, told me it meant we should dream about flying south for the winter. For my part, I have urged my people to give their imagination wings and let their spirits soar so that when this great day arrived at last their souls would be perfect fits for their new circumstances.' Here the little bird turned its head to look beyond the great wall of brass in the direction the other birds had flown.

" 'But you will come back in the winter, surely?' said the King in a pleading voice. 'Books make a lonely kingdom to rule over.'

"The little bird shook its head. 'The rule is the same with magical spells as with all other things,' it said. 'Once bitten, twice shy.'

"Quickly the King took *The Golden Treasure-Trove of Holy Conjury* from under his arm and tore out the spell to change things into what they really are. 'Here, this will be your antidote against any magic of mine,' he said. 'Now, surely, you and your people may visit me again.'

" 'Perhaps we will pass this way sometime, O Librarian King,' said the little bird, and taking up the spell it flew after its companions."

Abu Nesradin's coming to the end of his story caught the Padishah with his mouth full but did not prevent him from demanding loudly, "And what does all that rubbish mean?"

"It brings us to the miracle of which I spoke, Sire," said the poet. "One morning while walking in the palace garden, I rescued a little

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yellow-breasted bird from Charmion, the palace cat. It was this bird that told me all I have just told you. As my reward, it gave me the spell to change things into what they really are." The poet drew a paper from his sleeve. "Who can doubt that Zazu is a man trapped inside a donkey?"

"Man?" said the Padishah. "But I had my heart set on a talking donkey."

"Then just speak the spell until Zazu talks and speak no further, Sire," said the poet. "Even so, you will clearly see that all within the sound of your voice will take a step in the direction of what they really are."

Wiping his hands on his knees, the Padishah took the spell from Abu Nesradin. Then with one eye on the words and the other on Zazu, he read in a low, halfhearted voice, " 'Lizard's gizzards, Caesar's seizures, quizzer's—' " He stopped to cock a suspicious eye at the poet. "This sounds like the mad ravings of Hakim the Barber, Father of Odesters. Can such gibberish make Zazu talk?"

"Nay, nay," cried the merchants from the bazaar in utter disbelief. "Cluck, cluck," disapproved the Court Chamberlain and all his subchamberlains. The Commander of the Palace Cavalry and his officers shrieked their disdain of so preposterous an idea and displayed their uniforms to best advantage. The Royal Tax Collector shook his head and spat through his teeth, and the assorted small fry of the court heaped contemptuous bahs on the whole business.

The Padishah looked out over this noisy audience. Scowling as if at some bothersome thought, he helped himself to more food and, snuffling and snorting, tried to arrange his mind. But then the blind Mullah, who had been turning his head this way and that in agitation, cried, "I was told I was being taken to the Padishah's palace where some poor soul would try to make a donkey talk. But surely I have been led astray. Is this a palace or a barnyard? Do I hear pig or Padishah?"

The Padishah turned purple. But the holy man was Leader of the Devout throughout the realm so there was nothing the ruler could do but snort out a laugh. The audience followed along, whinnying, cackling, shrieking, and bleating with delight, pretending the Mullah had made a joke.

The Padishah scratched his cheek for a moment. Then, gesturing with the crook of his finger, he motioned for the poet to bring the donkey closer. "I will whisper the spell in Zazu's ear," he said.

"That cannot be!" cried the Mullah. "Only the dark loomcraft of

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the Jinn are to be muttered like curses. Holy spells should be shouted out like a call to prayer!"

The Padishah glared at the Vizier Tarik for having brought the troublesome Mullah to the audience. He threw back his shoulders decisively, spread out the paper with the spell on it, and opened his mouth. Then he closed his mouth again and, chewing thoughtfully, he looked around at his barnyard of courtiers. After a moment, he sighed, balled up the spell, and dropped it into the gravy boat. "All I wanted was a donkey that could talk, and maybe sing and dance a bit," he lamented. "Let the Almighty judge me if that was so very wrong."

There was a moment of silence and then the poet heard himself say, "Sire, give me another ten years like the last ten and I will teach your Zazu to dance."

The Padishah's tiny eyes glimmered. "No spells?" he asked. "No stories? Just a dancing Zazu?" When the poet bowed to all of this, the ruler said, "So be it."

When Tarik protested, his royal master dismissed him with a stare such as he had never seen before. The ashen Vizier fled the royal presence, leaving his favorite ring with the executioner.

When the audience had ended, the poet gave his arm to the Mullah Muzafar, who now found himself without a guide, and leading Zazu behind them they left the great hall. On the palace steps, the Mullah remarked, "I sensed in there that you were a man who had repented of past foolishness. Why then have you taken on another impossible task? Who could teach a donkey to dance?"

"In the next ten years, one of three things might come to pass," said the poet. "The Padishah might die. Or the donkey might die. Or Abu Nesradin might die. And failing that, perhaps the Almighty—" But here poet and holy man stopped dead in their tracks, for Zazu, who had been clip-clopping along behind them, suddenly went clippity-clop-clop-clippity. And when the astonished poet looked behind him, the donkey gave him a wink and did it again, executing a wonderful little tap routine on the steps.

The Mullah heard all this and laughed. "The next ten years are yours for your art, poet," he said. "The Almighty has already given you your miracle."

And suddenly Abu Nesradin knew what Zazu had been trying to tell him all these years. "I cannot talk or sing, my brother," the animal had wanted to say, "but I already know how to dance." The

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poet laughed and the holy man laughed again. Then each threw an arm across Zazu's neck and all three of them danced together down the palace steps.

Before the next ten years had come to pass, the Padishah died in a purple rage when the executioner botched the slow death he had ordered for his Vizier. Some say Tarik never judged any diamond better spent than that one on the hand with the quick knife in it. As for Zazu, the donkey became the dancing pride of Persia. And though Abu Nesradin never found his rhyme for "scissors," he lived a long life and so perfected his art that he could command a capon a line for his verse. Indeed, he wrote so many wonderful things that the Mullah Muzafar and the devout of the realm feared the poet might singlehandedly bring about the terrible Dawn Without Cockcrow, that silent herald of the Day of Judgment.

And if the devout fear that day, my masters, how much more should we?

DETECTIVERSE

SWEET ESCAPE

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

The convicts at State Penitentiary
Believe their new warden's a lout—
He won't let the inmates eat chocolate.
He doesn't want them breaking out.

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David Pitt was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and now lives in Toronto. He graduated from St. Mary's University with a B.A. in English and Philosophy and has had two radio scripts produced by the CBC. Although he has had several stories published in a local science-fiction and fantasy magazine, "Happy Birthday" is his first professionally published (paid for) fiction.

"Happy birthday," the protege said to his mentor. It was a reunion of sorts. The last time they were together they had been tracking the head of a major corporation across Europe, watching to see if he would betray a certain confidence, and if he did they were going to have to kill him . . .

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by DAVID PITT

They sat across the room from each other, the assassin and his protege. They were silent for several minutes. The protege fished something out of his pocket and tossed it on the coffee table between them. "Happy birthday," he said.

It was a reunion of sorts. The last time they were together it was early 1980 and they were tracking the head of a major corporation across Europe, watching to see if he would betray a certain confidence, and if he did they were going to have to kill him.

Making a murder look like an accident is difficult. No one will believe that a man shot himself three times, twice in the forehead and once in the heart. No one will believe that a man fell on a knife, got up, and repeated the act six times. You have to make it look perfectly accidental, and that takes time. It had become a very long assignment.

The assassin celebrated his sixty-fourth birthday in Europe in 1980. Forty years in the profession and he was beginning to get

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tired. He came out of the assignment alive, which was good, and sick, which was not so good.

The leave of absence stretched into retirement, and they parted suddenly and with angry words. The protege had gone on to the top of the profession, and it had been seven years since they'd spoken.

The assassin, who was calling himself Peter these days, picked up the small box and shook it. "What is it?"

"A stereo system, of course." The protege, who called *him*self Steven, chuckled, but it wasn't convincing.

Peter opened the box. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" The box contained four miniature bottles of wine.

"I took them from the airplane," Steven said.

"In other words, I was an afterthought. Are you on assignment? Is that why you're in town?"

"Well, sort of." Steven made a half shrug that indicated he was unable to go into details.

Peter nodded slowly. Steven caught the meaning of the gesture. "For God's sake, you don't think I'm here to kill you?"

"It's happened before." Eliminating former employees was the best way to make sure they kept secrets.

"Not in this case," Steven said.

Peter smiled, relieved. "You look good," he said.

"Well, I've been keeping busy. Oh, I almost forgot. Remember Morris?"

Morris had been a good man until something in his mind had bent or snapped and he'd starting hunting his friends, meeting them in the street, greeting them with a cheery wave and putting a bullet in their hearts.

Steven was grinning. "He's dead."

"You?"

Steven bobbed his head.

"*You* got Morris? Hell of a credit."

Steven crossed his legs, stretching out in the chair. "They've been talking to me about an advisory position."

"You're too good to retire."

"It's not retirement, it's advancement. Out of the dangerous work."

"Even so—"

"Nice apartment," Steven said.

"It's not bad. Of course, I used to be able to afford something three times larger."

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"But when you could afford it you were never in one place long enough to *live* in it."

Peter laughed.

"Retirement must be hell," Steven said.

"It isn't so bad. I'm active, and the pension's good."

"Active! Chess with the old men at the Center. Shuffleboard. Wonderful. When's the last time you held a gun in your hand?"

"Wednesday."

"What?"

"It's hard to let go," Peter said. "You know how it is. Damn near impossible to quit cold-turkey."

"I could give it up," Steven said.

"No, you couldn't."

Steven shook his head. "Listen," he said, "this is supposed to be a reunion. I want to take you out and buy you a drink."

"Why go out?" Peter leaned over and twisted open one of the airplane bottles. "To reunions," he said, and drank half the bottle. He passed it to Steven.

"To old times," Steven said, and finished the bottle.

"What the hell happened to your training?" Peter said. "I just *drank* from that bottle. I could have transferred any number of poisons to it."

"Well, ordinarily I wouldn't have touched it."

"If it's not instinctive, you're in trouble. You know that."

"It *is* instinctive."

"Then why did you drink from the bottle?"

"Why are you still testing me after eight years?"

Peter frowned. "I've been hearing rumors," he said, "about cutbacks."

"So have I," Steven said quietly.

"You may find yourself asked to do some of the cutting."

Steven shook his head. "The idea of killing people I know—my *friends*, for God's sake."

"It's what you're paid to do."

"It makes me sick to think of it."

"Never think about it," Peter said, and the words came out of a dozen years ago, the words he'd said over and over to Steven when they'd both been younger and closer.

"Did you ever kill someone you knew?" Steven asked.

Yes, he had. Several times. And the first time, it had been hard, looking her in the eyes and sinking the knife in. But it got easier.

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Eventually you stopped distinguishing between friends and strangers. You thought of people in terms of vulnerable points, of size and shape and weight.

But Peter didn't say any of that. He simply nodded.

"Did you ever think twice about doing it?"

"Yes," Peter said. "The first time." He had put it off for five days, he'd wanted to spend every minute with her before he had to move on, but after it was over he knew you could never think twice—it only made it harder, because you had to do it eventually. Even if you loved her.

Peter stretched his arms out on the back of the sofa. "Damn," he said, "that hurts."

"Arthritis?"

"Mild. Some days are worse than others."

"Mom suffers from it," Steven said, "pretty bad."

"Have you seen your mother? How is she?"

"She's doing all right."

They fell silent. Looked at each other.

"Well," Steven said, "I guess I better be going."

"Back to work?"

"Mm." Steven stood up and walked slowly to the door, scratching his left arm. "It's been great seeing you." He reached the door, swung around. "About those cutbacks—"

"I know," Peter said.

Steven's hand dropped, and when it reached his side it held his pistol. "I lied," he said.

"Sometimes you have to."

"It hurts like hell to do this to you."

"Do it," Peter said. "It's your job."

Slowly, Steven raised the pistol.

Peter lifted his arms. In his hands was a pistol identical to Steven's. "You shouldn't have thought twice," he said, and he pulled the trigger twice.

The first bullet ripped through Steven's right wrist and his gun fell. The second bullet entered his neck and he heard it come out the back of his head and embed itself in the wall before he collapsed. He tried to speak, but his vocal cords were shredded.

Damn you, Dad, he wanted to say, I could have done it if you'd given me more time.

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a *NEW* Big Red Fred story by

THOMAS ADCOCK

Marianne Bradshaw smoked a True cigarette and the first thing out of her mouth was, "I'd quit the damn things for years, but what's the difference now?"

"You mean you don't think you have a chance?"

Mrs. Bradshaw laughed, looked up at the mirror in the small conference room, and curled her lip at whoever was watching them on the other side of the glass. "Day one of my trial," she said, "I guarantee you the prosecutor is going to read into the record word-for-word what I told the police when they arrested me."

"Which was what?" Fred asked her.

When she told him, and that they had it all on tape, he thought of her young defense lawyer. "I'll bet Waterman loves you to pieces for that . . ."

THE SIXTY-SIX-CENT DIVORCE

by THOMAS ADCOCK

On the tenth of May, at five minutes before noon, secretaries and file clerks and mailroom workers and junior executives waited for an elevator to stop at the fourteenth floor of the Penobscot Building in downtown Detroit. They carried brown-paper bags with sandwiches inside, paperback books, newspapers, and transistor radios, and they were eager to leave their stuffy offices for the warm spring air outside and an hour's freedom in nearby Kennedy Square or Hart Plaza. It was a Thursday like a thousand others until the

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elevator doors opened, like curtains, to reveal a murderous drama in progress.

A forty-year-old man by the name of Robert Bradshaw, with dark brown hair and blue eyes and a navy-blue pinstripe suit, maroon tie, shiny black Gucci loafers, was doubled over on his side on the floor of the elevator car, his body twisted in pain. His wife, a slightly plump blonde woman of the same age, with a green-and-white-print dress and a face that still looked like the high-school cheerleader she'd once been, stood over him with a .38-caliber revolver in her right hand. Bradshaw screamed at her, "No! No! No! No!"

Marianne Bradshaw turned and saw the crowd of frozen faces. Then she looked back at her cringing husband and squeezed off the last bullet in the revolver's ammunition chamber. It went through her husband's hand straight into his heart. The elevator doors closed and Robert Bradshaw's final cries faded.

Mrs. Bradshaw stepped off the elevator at the top floor, careful not to stain her shoes in the blood streaming from beneath her husband's body. The doors closed behind her and the elevator went back downward, the doors opening up at one floor and then another, where people waiting to go outside shrieked in horror.

Nearly a year later, Judge Ralph Struthers, in his black robe and half glasses, sat behind his high bench and read from a document to a packed courtroom: "Of the criminal charges of open murder and felony use of a firearm, this court finds the Defendant, Marianne Bradshaw—"

I was in the courtroom along with about a hundred other reporters and a gaggle of anxious lawyers and the usual contingent of old ladies and gents who prefer juicy trials over television soap operas. All the relatives were split up on either side of a long aisle, which was pretty much how they had probably congregated themselves some years back when Robert, in a rented green-pastel tuxedo, and Marianne, in an antique white-lace gown and veil, with a nosegay of violets in her trembling hands, pledged to love and cherish one another until death.

My story had already been written and edited and set in type for the forthcoming issue of *Detroit Expression* and now needed only the verdict line from Judge Struthers before going to press in the morning. Marianne had loaned me her favorite wedding photograph. Tomorrow, for better or for worse, she and Robert would be smiling

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from the magazine cover from beneath a nuptial trellis of pink and yellow roses.

The people in the courtroom around me leaned forward to hear the words of the soft-spoken man, as if what he was saying could provide a comforting moral to the terrible business that is murder. They were people who read in the newspapers of murder after murder after murder in this city and always there were the cozy resolutions that came in quotation marks around a judge's words at the end. This was tailor-made for newspaper editors, who insist on neat frames around stories and will countenance no dangling uncertainties in matters of passionate crime. Uncertainty is too close to the truth and truth is difficult to bear. And so their readers are encouraged in the homely trust of justice.

I would never begrudge anyone such faith and security, especially in this world that needs so much more of both. But I do have my own particular way of telling a story, for anyone who cares to hear what one old man has to say, which among other things is like: justice may certainly be just, but it can be ignorant, too.

"Here's your ham and eggs and the paper, which has got this story inside you should read first because it's got Fred Walsh written all over it."

That was how I first got onto the bloody thing. Betty herself, the proprietress of Busy Betty's Cafe on Cass Avenue, which has enjoyed my breakfast trade since 1945, set down my meal along with a butter-stained copy of the Detroit *Free Press*, folded back to the remoteness of tire ads and late crime briefs that have been deemed too cheap or common to command a replate of page one. With a red grease pencil, Betty had circled three paragraphs and a two-deck, eighteen-point headline that read, CITY POLICE HOLD SUBURBAN HOUSEWIFE IN HUSBAND'S HIGH-NOON EXECUTION. Besides the names and places and ages and such, which didn't mean anything special, the headline had about all the information I figured the homicide cops were letting out just then.

The telephone rang. Betty answered and said it was for me and I sighed. I hadn't had a bite of my eggs yet.

"You catch the item about the lady who went and blew away her old man in the Penobscot Building?" This was Jean talking, my wife going on half a century. She's the same age as me and an Episcopalian and a Republican besides. She listens to opera from New York on the radio and when she invites women over to the house for tea

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they all wear gloves, but when she gets herself worked up about something she's decided is right down my alley she sounds quite a lot like Bonnie Barrow.

I told her I'd read what little there was to the story so far.

"Well, I thought you ought to know it's something I think would go over like gangbusters at your magazine. If I were you, I'd get hopping."

"I'm pushing seventy and I haven't hopped in better than two decades."

"Except on me."

"Which is how come I call you Old Sexy."

"Cut that out—I know Betty's standing right there."

Jean always scolds me when I use her nickname in public, but sometimes it just slips out. Whenever I call her Old Sexy, she comes back at me with my nickname, which is Big Red Fred and I should explain so as not to confuse the issue here.

Back in the 1950s I was pink-slipped, you might say, by the late Detroit *Times,* and when every other paper in town avoided me like I was a social disease because some of my best friends were down in Washington taking the Fifth Amendment, which wasn't as popular then as it is nowadays, and after eating macaroni and cheese for about four months and having Detroit Edison cut off the lights and worrying how on earth I was going to feed a second baby on the way, I signed on as a reporter for the only paper in town that would have me—the *Daily Worker*, organ of the American Communist Party. It didn't matter that I wrote about cops and crime, just like I'd always written for Hearst's old *Times,* everybody started calling me "Big Red Fred."

Physically, it suited me. I'm over six feet tall and was ginger-haired. But as for the political implications of the nickname, not once during the blacklist years did I ever declare my politics by brand and I sure as hell don't feel obligated to do so today. Big Red Fred I am, loyal American—and retiree. Jean and I live on Social Security, which was among the dangerous and wide-eyed causes we both supported in our marching days, and a small pension check that arrives the first of every month courtesy of the American Communist Party pension fund, which is administered by the same Manhattan bank where half the Fortune 500 companies also do business. That and the little extra cash I get from writing crime stories for *Detroit Expression*. Like the Bradshaw story.

After breakfast, I caught a taxi over to the Beaubien Street head-

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quarters of the Detroit Police Department. I asked around in the women's holding section and found out that Marianne Bradshaw's lawyer was the son of an old crony of mine by the name of Waterman. So right away I telephoned my friend Waterman, and Waterman telephoned his kid, and Waterman Junior got me in to see the lady who'd blasted her husband in front of a dozen or so eyewitnesses the Wayne County Prosecutor's office was no doubt interviewing even as I passed through the metal detector on the way to women's holding.

We met in a small conference room with a mirror on the wall that had probably never fooled anybody. The room had a couple of classroom chairs with writing surfaces built onto the right arms, ashtrays, and a wastepaper basket. Fluorescent lighting made everything look ghastly.

Marianne Bradshaw smoked a True cigarette and the first thing out of her mouth was, "I'd quit the damn things for years, but what's the difference now?"

"You mean you don't think you have a chance?"

Mrs. Bradshaw laughed, looked up at the mirror, and curled her lip at whoever was watching us on the other side of the glass. Then she focused back on me and said, "Day one of my trial, I guarantee you the prosecutor is going to read into the record word-for-word what I told the police when they arrested me."

"Which was what?"

"Well, they brought me here and read me my rights like they're supposed to, and I understood it all. God, who wouldn't when you hear it all the time on the television shows? Anyhow, I knew if I wanted I could keep quiet. But that's just what I *didn't* want, so I told these two detectives, 'I've got all the guilt I knew I'd have and a little more. I know what I did was wrong, but I had to. I had no other way out.' They have it all on tape."

"I'll bet young Waterman loves you to pieces for that."

Mrs. Bradshaw shrugged. "Who cares?" I watched her light up another True from the one that was burned down to a butt. Her hands were steady.

Then she said, "I feel like telling you something I didn't tell the police. Actually, I was going to kill *myself*, in front of my husband, so he'd have it on his head for the rest of his life and so everybody who knew us would know our perfect little life wasn't such a paradise after all. Right up to the last minute, I was going to do it to myself.

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But instead, in the elevator, I pointed the gun at Robert and pulled the trigger—and kept right on pulling.

"Then I got off at the top floor and got another elevator back down to the lobby. I threw the bullet casings and the gun away in a trash bin outside on the street and just walked around a little bit. I remember seeing an office worker on the street who'd gotten a good look at me when the elevator door opened once, but down on the street she didn't recognize me. That's funny, isn't it?

"And then I remember thinking how I couldn't really be sure Robert was dead and I got panicky thinking if he was alive he'd tell somebody I'd shot him. I know this sounds crazy. Why shouldn't it?

"I went back into the lobby of the Penobscot and the police were already there. They weren't allowing anybody on anything except the freight elevator. There was a big crowd and I saw some medics giving mouth-to-mouth to Robert. I asked a man what was going on and he said, 'Somebody got shot.'

"I decided to take the freight elevator to the nineteenth floor, which is where Robert and I had an appointment with this broker from Investors Diversified, and I said to the receptionist, 'Where's my husband? Did he get here yet? I'm a little late.' And then I can't really say what happened because I honestly don't remember, but I was under arrest."

Mrs. Bradshaw dropped her second cigarette to the floor and stamped it out. "So how does that sound to you, Mr. Walsh? Pretty cut and dried?"

"You told all this to the police?"

"Everything except how I actually wanted to kill myself." She rubbed the back of her neck, and as she did her head tipped toward me and I could see the skin at her shoulders was discolored.

"Mrs. Bradshaw, did your husband beat you up?"

"My husband gave me a four-bedroom house on a half-acre wooded lot, the last place on a cul-de-sac in a beautiful subdivision called Old Homestead, if you please, in the beautiful suburb of Farmington Hills. And he gave me a Thunderbird and a swimming pool—that to tell you the truth we never cared to swim in because it was always filled with leaves and dead wood from the trees. You should have seen my kitchen. Robert used to say that the old royal families of Europe used to have wars over who got to live like we did in Farmington Hills."

"Did he beat you, Mrs. Bradshaw?"

"My husband gave me everything. Except what I really wanted

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in the end, which was a divorce. He was very old-school on that subject."

"Did he beat you?"

"Who the hell do you think you are? Father Walsh? You know what, I don't want to talk to you any more. I have the right to be silent, you know. Why don't you run along now and see my lawyer? They tell me he's the best criminal defense attorney in the city. The two of you can have a lovely lunch someplace, and in between your martinis you can talk about the crazy suburban lady in the slammer and maybe you can figure out what the trouble was in paradise."

She called for a matron and was loud about it. And then she lit up another cigarette and glared at me until I'd gone.

Sure enough, we talked about her between martinis. My martinis—and three of them, for the record. Like so many people his age, young Waterman didn't drink or smoke or blow grass. I'm not saying Waterman's kid was some wrong number, but I would have felt more at ease with him if he'd had the decency to join me in a drink. We were at Jacoby's on Brush Street, after all, which is where his daddy and I used to drink away many afternoons. Instead, he sat in this joint where lawyers and judges and law clerks and politicians and anybody who wants a favor or maybe something fixed in return for picking up the tab and he ordered a salad, and matched my martinis with Vernor's ginger ale as he picked my brains about the case.

"Well, I'll tell you, Leon," I said to him, "I've known of a lot of killers who right after they did the job acted very peculiar. Especially women, don't ask me why.

"Once I wrote about this woman who killed her mother by smothering her with pillows while she slept, and then she spent the entire night and all the next day doing the spring cleaning in her mother's house, with the old lady upstairs dead in her bed. Completely lost track of time. I'd say your client was a classic case of that kind of shock condition."

"I think you're right," Waterman said. "Which is why I'm going to try something that's never been tried before in a Michigan court. I'll be calling in a grief therapist for defense expert testimony. Racehorse Haynes has a line on a grief man and the guy is absolutely unshakeable. You know Racehorse Haynes, don't you?"

Of course I knew Richard "Racehorse" Haynes. He was the best damn wily lawyer in Texas, if not the whole United States. I once

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saw Racehorse in action in a civil case here in Detroit where he represented a writer friend of mine whose wife was really trying to stick it to him in a divorce proceeding. Racehorse went out and hired ten young guys, all of them big strapping studs. He had them sit with the spectators on the day when the wife's character was under question. The opposing attorney caught on quick and asked for a little conference in the judge's chambers. Racehorse cut a private deal that was very favorable for his client and then when the trial got back under way, Racehorse turned to the spectators' seats and said, "Okay, fellows, I guess we won't need you after all." And the ten guys all got up and left. What do you think went on in the minds of the twelve men and women good and true?

I asked Waterman if he'd seen bruises on Mrs. Bradshaw when he talked to her during her booking. He said he had. "They looked bad to me," I said. "If I was her counsel, I'd insist she be given a complete physical, with a full set of witnessed photographs."

"Good idea," he said. And Leon Waterman, Jr., made a note of this on a flip pad inside his breast-pocket Filofax. His daddy would have remembered, or he would have used a Jacoby's cocktail napkin on the side without the jokes.

"When I asked her if her husband clouted her around, she got hostile with me," I said. "I've seen battered women act that way before. They have stories to tell, but it takes time to get anything out of them. They want to tell you, but they're ashamed. Hell, some of them think they deserved it."

Waterman closed up his Filofax and said, "Well, it looks to me like I've got something to work with here. We can certainly get a reduction of charges, I should think."

"Would you now?" The kid was generally all right, and I liked his taking a tip from Racehorse about the grief therapist, but his daddy would have indicated that he'd do the job of defending Mrs. Bradshaw with something at least approaching the passion she'd brought to the crime. "Don't you think there's a whole lot missing from the picture?"

"Like what?" young Waterman said. Spoken like a true child of the television generation.

"I don't know yet, but something." Spoken like an old man who has come to understand that one of the central ironies of life is that uncertainties just keep mounting up with age—that no one thing is true, *all* of it is true. "Something's missing here that you're not

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going to find in your law books. And it's something that sure as hell belongs in the courtroom if your client's going to have a chance."

I had the hotshot kid lawyer confused and he called over a waiter and ordered himself a martini.

"Now I'll tell you what I'd like you to do, Leon," I said.

It took him four days, but the kid pulled all the strings at his disposal and managed to do what needed doing. I was glad to know he wasn't above that sort of thing. He'd have a lot of favors to return one day, but that's the name of the courthouse game. Anyway, he got enough discreet word out on the legal street that Marianne Bradshaw was a battered and otherwise abused wife and that the politics of the defense would be pretty loaded. It resulted in the granting of bond release. This is not the usual course in pre-trial murder cases, but it's not exactly unheard of.

I needed her out of the trap and its constant reminders of doom and punishment. I needed to get the story out of her that would save the rest of her life, part of which she'd killed when she did it to Robert.

What occurred to me as I sat talking and drinking with Leon that day was that my dear old friend Betty and my wife Jean had been instantly convinced, based on next to no facts, that Marianne Bradshaw was my kind of story. Something about the bare bones of the case struck a chord in the two of them, a chord so deep I didn't get bite one of my breakfast before I got my hopping orders.

And so Leon and I persuaded Marianne to come by my house, ostensibly to talk about a defense strategy. The strategy was that Jean and Betty would be on hand to soften the edges.

We sat in the backyard rose garden and ate tomato sandwiches Betty had made up at the cafe and drank Jean's sun tea. And just as I expected, the three women got to treating Leon and me like we were invisible in about five seconds flat. Our job was to listen and learn.

"You got a real beautiful place here, Jean," Marianne said. "A real home. I can feel it."

That was nice to hear. Jean and I got our little asbestos-sided bungalow at 8627½ Penrod Street on the new G.I. Bill when I came home from the war. We raised two daughters and enjoyed most of the neighbors and never saw much sense in the great white exodus to suburbia, so we stayed put.

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"Thanks," my wife said. "We built it up bit by bit. My rose garden wasn't here the first eight years. It was just a little old backyard with a dirt alley and trash cans. But we wanted a place for the girls to play, and now we can sit out here. I could tell you stories about something that happened on about every square inch."

"People like coming by here," Betty said. "This is one of those houses where everybody gets together when they need to get together. Every neighborhood's got a house like that."

Marianne smiled. "Mine doesn't. We have wide lawns but there isn't anything worth remembering that ever happened in my backyard. I'm not feeling sorry for myself—that's just a fact."

"I'm sorry," Jean said. "We all need to have some good moments in life or the humdrum eats us alive."

And then there was no stopping Marianne as she told her story.

Two weeks before he died, Robert Bradshaw quit his job of seventeen years. He was an engineer at a construction company in Dearborn and his annual salary was $75,000. But he wouldn't be needing that salary now that he was a millionaire many times over.

Beginning in 1982, Bradshaw had begun trading commodities on home computers with a capital of $35,000, all his own savings. Each day before going off to work, he would give Marianne heavily detailed instructions on the day's trading, according to a system he'd developed that was absolutely foolproof—so systematically foolproof that he believed he could actually predict prices days before they were hammered out in the hectic trading of commodities-market floors. And he'd made a killing. The stockbroker's statements put his assets at $30,000,000. He was on easy street. All the years of charting and graph-plotting and studying ebbs and flows of a tricky market had paid off.

But none of it was true. There was no money. Each dollar was a lie and each lie had been deposited in Robert's account by his wife.

For a little better than a year before she shot him to death, Marianne had doctored ledger sheets and bank receipts, altered stockbroker reports, and forged tax forms to hide steady losses from Robert. It started purely by accident, when she discovered that the typewriters at the Farmington Hills Community Library matched the Investors Diversified Services statements' typeface. And so penciled zeroes on a bank-deposit slip changed $110 to $110,000. Two income-tax forms were prepared, one true and accurate and based on Robert's income from his job, the other a fiction for Robert and

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his pride, based on the supposed killing he was making in commodities.

To maintain the fiction, Marianne cashed in gold coins and sold individual-retirement-account certificates and other such investments to cover for money where there was none. The maze of her lies grew so intricate and vast and deceptive that the more she tampered, the less she could retreat.

And why?

When Marianne graduated from Redford High in 1965, she and a group of her cheerleader friends went out to celebrate at a restaurant. There she met an intense, handsome boy who had just graduated from Cooley High and without a day's break enrolled in a technical college to become an engineer. He had already started night classes and the following week he was set to begin a day job as a draftsman.

Marianne described him to all her friends as a "real gentleman." And not at all like her father, who had left her mother when Marianne began kindergarten and managed to find himself in one scrape of trouble after another, though he was kind and loving to her in a remote way. Robert took Marianne to a dance club the night they met, and he opened car doors for her, and when they held each other on the dance floor Marianne closed her eyes and remembered the long-ago feel of her father carrying her, half asleep, to her bed.

After a year of dating, they married, and established themselves in a small apartment on Tireman Street near Joy Road. Everyone generally agreed they were too young—but that they were so happy. Everything they wanted in life was calculated according to efficient plans Robert would carefully write down on his graphs and charts. And everything was predicated on Robert educating himself into a position where he could command a big salary and Marianne could attend to making expendable income work double and triple time.

It started with Robert's studies. When he couldn't get through a required literature course, Marianne read the material and wrote the papers, which Robert edited and submitted. He returned home from school one evening after a test, convinced he'd gotten a poor grade because of Marianne's laxity in preparing him. It was an open-handed slap across the face, this first time Robert struck her. And she was more frightened of the rage inside her husband than physically hurt. As it turned out, Robert got an A on the test—and he apologized for the angry flareup and said it would never happen again.

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Several months later, Marianne was told by her doctor that she was barren. Robert took the news hard and was deeply depressed for days, even skipping some classes, saying he was too tired for school. One day during this period, one of his cousins announced the christening of her baby and Marianne went to a gift shop and had an infant toy wrapped nicely. When she brought it home, Robert was furious that she'd had it wrapped, that he couldn't see the gift for himself in advance, and he slapped her again with his open hand.

Then the slaps became closed-fist punches and Marianne's collarbone was broken.

In the early Seventies, Robert decided their small city apartment was no longer suitable. Marianne had her eye on a house that was available in the neighborhood, but Robert wanted to leave the city entirely and so they did. Robert chose a modest house in a middle-class suburb. They were surrounded by households full of children. By now, Robert was working at his profession and constantly studying ways to build his fortune.

Every penny counted. No more Christmas trees or presents—they were a waste of money and time. Regular habits and schedules would maximize their opportunities. Dinner was to be on the table at seven o'clock without fail, lunch packed for Robert first thing in the morning to save on restaurants, evenings spent reading investment-guide materials and mapping out grand financial plans.

Maybe if they had been able to have children, Marianne said wistfully, it would have been different—better.

And then she gained weight. And Robert had a whole new reason to abuse her. Then it seemed he could find a reason a day. She cut her hair too short to please him and he slapped her until she couldn't hear in one ear. Her fingernails were dirty at the dinner table and he punched her face. She covered the next day's swelling with mascara and realized that there was no one in her life any more to see the mascara or the bruise beneath it.

One December, a heavy snowstorm prevented Robert from going to work and he spent most of the day beating Marianne with a wooden hanger, calling her a fat slob, a lazy bitch, a worthless parasite.

After the earlier beatings, Robert would apologize for losing control and take Marianne into his arms, and she would close her eyes and think of her father holding her. Then, in time, he used less intimacy and more gifts to atone for the pain he'd given her.

She tried leaving him once. She drove into the city, to a women's

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shelter, and all she could think of was how Robert always threatened her, "Don't you tell anyone what goes on in the privacy of our home or I'll beat you so bad you'll never get up again—if you aren't dead, you'll wish you were."

Five years ago, Robert borrowed $20,000 from his boss and invested it along with $10,000 of his own through a commodities broker in New York. In six months, the investment lost half its principal value and Robert pulled out. That was when he was determined to beat the system, when he began devising his foolproof system. He saved everything he could and entered the market again, instructing Marianne how to keep the daily charts on graph paper, calculating the price averages and acceleration velocities of commodities. He began with silver and copper. Then gold. Then sugar and lumber and soybeans, cocoa and grapes.

Marianne was to pick up the *Wall Street Journal* each morning at a drugstore in a nearby shopping mall. And all morning long at home, she would telephone the market to get opening prices and follow them on the graph-paper charts as they changed. Robert would call from his job up to eight times a day for her report, and at the end of the day he would tell her whether to buy or sell. The evenings were spent inputting data on their home computer.

There were losses, of course. And every time it was Marianne's fault and he beat her. There were gains, too—lots of them—but Robert took so little pleasure when his system worked that he ignored the gains, even though they mounted. All he cared about were the losses. And beating up on Marianne in the privacy of their home.

Marianne suggested marriage counseling, or a divorce. He beat her. She begged him to see a doctor and he said it would be a ridiculous waste of his valuable time. She had a psychiatrist come to dinner and talk to them, and Robert told the doctor he was too sympathetic to his wife. When the doctor left, Marianne was beaten. The next day, Robert attempted suicide with a rope tied to a support-beam in the ceiling of their two-car garage while some neighbor kids bounced a ball against the garage from the outside. Marianne knew he hated it when the kids did that, so she hurried out to chase them away—and found Robert hanging. She hacked at the rope with a weed cutter, saved him, and immediately regretted what she'd done on instinct.

She worked the commodities system Robert had developed all by herself for the three days he was hospitalized "for nervous exhaustion." Every day, she made a substantial gain on investments and

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when he got home Robert seemed to be pleased. Marianne allowed herself to believe he was getting better.

On the fourth day, with Robert home under instructions to stay in bed for twenty-four hours, Marianne had a modest loss on investments. Robert beat her up and broke her collarbone again. That was when she decided to lie, when she began the forgeries and doctored the deposit slips and all the rest of it. Lie after lie she told of success after success.

Every month, Marianne drove to the Farmington Hills Library and erased the figures on the brokerage statements, then typed in new numbers and put the statements back in the envelopes and resealed them and left them on Robert's desk in the den. She lived in fear that someday he'd get to the mail before she did, but he didn't. She had to intercept every telephone call that came to the house because checks were starting to bounce. Controlling the flow of information and stalling the day when the truth would have to be told was Marianne's daily terror. But it was a terror she preferred over the beatings that were, at last, no longer part of her life.

With the approach of this past April, Robert began talking about the preparation of their income taxes, and Marianne knew the Internal Revenue Service would force the truth. She got into her car and, after changing numbers on a monthly brokerage report, she drove to a gun dealer and purchased a .38-caliber revolver. The store ran an identity check, sold her the gun, and helped her register the weapon with the Farmington Hills Police Department. She told the police she wanted the gun at home for protection. She didn't tell Robert about the gun and kept it hidden in her own car. And it made her daily terror all the greater.

She prepared her usual two income-tax returns, one listing the truth of the matter—that the Bradshaws were due a $7,000 return—and the other showing Robert's salary and all his commodities earnings and how the Bradshaws owed the government $23,000.

Robert decided that since it was their best year ever, they should splurge and take the return that Marianne had prepared to an accountant for an extra close examination to see if they might whittle down the $23,000 they owed. And so they went with Marianne's phony return and sat in the accountant's office. Marianne was frightened out of her mind. Of course the accountant would spot a phony. She'd carried her .38 in her purse.

Robert bragged to the accountant about his foolproof commodities-investment system and said he'd been thinking lately about writing

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it all down and publishing it, and then franchising the system for others' use. The accountant got all excited and told Robert how he could be of help to him in such a venture. And by the way, the accountant said, it looked like Marianne had done a very fine job on the tax return.

Robert wrote out a check for $23,000 and gave it to Marianne to mail with the return after she'd made photocopies. She made all the copies and then tore up the check and mailed the genuine return. She badly needed the $7,000 due back from the IRS.

One night, just over a week ago, she again asked Robert for a divorce. He was dumbfounded. She told him she wanted to be free. He told her the only freedom in the world was money and that the two of them were a team and he needed her more than ever before now that they were financially free at last. He knew it had been hard on her, but hadn't it all paid off? He held her in his arms and she shut her eyes.

Robert quit his job on a Monday morning. He walked into the construction company in Dearborn, cleared out his desk, and told his boss goodbye. He went straight from the office to a Mercedes-Benz automobile dealership in Bloomfield Hills and wrote out a check for $110,000. On Friday, when he was home and Marianne was no longer able to intercept the mail and the telephone calls, the Mercedes dealership informed him that his check was bounced for insufficient funds. Robert got in his car, drove to the bank, and raised mighty hell with an officer, shaking a fist full of doctored deposit slips. At home, Marianne sat in a chair, too faint to stand.

When he returned, Robert ranted and raved about the bank and bankers in general. He had no blame for Marianne, who had hidden the .38 in the kitchen breadbox in the event she needed it.

During the following week, Robert found discrepancies in the computer printouts and he thought the shortages there combined with the shortages in his accounts at the bank were far too coincidental. He told Marianne he suspected the brokerage firm downtown was somehow cheating them, that someone there must be raiding their money by way of computer theft.

That was on a Wednesday. It was the next day, on Thursday the tenth of May, that Robert and Marianne had their appointment at the brokerage firm downtown.

Marianne was on the witness stand for five days straight, then

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again for two days after the weekend recess. Waterman had opted for a trial without jury, reasoning that Marianne's incredible deceptions were so complicated and Robert's trust in her so complete that, despite his violence, jurors would have difficulty seeing her problem objectively. A woman prosecutor by the name of Rae Converse had no objection to such a proceeding, not wishing to run the risk of a jury overly sympathetic to a battered-woman defendant.

Waterman, after days of running Marianne through the years of her financial manipulations, legitimate and otherwise, finally asked her to describe the events of the morning of May tenth in the Penobscot Building.

"While we waited for the elevator I told him there might be some problem," she said.

"And what did your husband say to that?"

"He asked me what the hell I was talking about and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he suddenly realized I had been lying." She hesitated before adding, "And if we were alone he'd beat the truth out of me."

"What happened on the elevator? Just tell the court in your own words."

"We started going up. I'd decided to kill myself—the gun was in my purse, all loaded up. I had a sweater over my arm. It was windy that morning. I pulled the gun out so Robert couldn't see it—I was pretending to listen to him. He kept saying, over and over, 'There'd better not be anything wrong up there, there'd better goddamn not be anything wrong!' "

"And you were going to the brokerage office?"

"Yes. We were on the way up, I don't know where. The fourteenth floor, the police say. And the door opened up there and all sorts of people saw me."

"Saw you do what?" Waterman asked her.

"Well, like I said, I'd decided to kill my*self*, but Robert started yelling about how there'd better not be anything wrong and I started firing the gun at him."

"And why did you do that?"

"Because I was terrified, that's why! I knew the situation with the money and I knew he'd find out in a few minutes that we had exactly eleven hundred dollars to our name! He'd just quit his job and I'd cheated him for years! I was terrified!"

"Yes, Mrs. Bradshaw, we can understand that. What happened when the elevator door opened at the fourteenth floor?"

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"He was down. I'd shot him and he was on the floor, hollering at me. The door opened and there were all these people standing there, but I just pulled the trigger again until I'd used up the last bullet."

"And you felt in imminent mortal danger in that elevator?"

"Yes."

"You had no other reasonable means of escaping your husband's violence, of escaping a sure beating—perhaps the beating he'd always threatened might end your own life?"

Marianne Bradshaw looked at her hands. And I thought of the wedding picture and how she'd held violets in them.

She whispered, "Yes."

In cross-examination, Rae Converse asked the defendant, "Mrs. Bradshaw, why would you think to shoot *yourself* in, of all places, an elevator? Why didn't you wait to shoot yourself when you were upstairs in the brokerage office? Maybe at the moment when your broker told your husband the truth. That would have been dramatic, wouldn't it?"

Waterman objected and the judge sustained the objection.

"Mrs. Bradshaw," Rae Converse continued, "didn't you choose the elevator for gun play because you figured your husband couldn't escape, that you could finally have him at your mercy? Isn't that what really went through your mind?"

"No."

"Do you mean to tell the court that you fired all those bullets into your husband and then when the door opened on the fourteenth floor and all those people could see you with the gun in your hand, you fired a *sixth* time at a bloodied and dying man and all those shots were panic shots?"

"Not all of them were panic shots, no."

Waterman was on his feet, requesting that the judge recess the cross-examination since Mrs. Bradshaw was obviously becoming distraught.

"I am not distraught," Marianne said. "I'm capable of answering the prosecutor's questions."

The judge told Prosecutor Converse to go on.

"Tell us what you mean when you say not all the shots were in panic," Rae Converse said, breaking the most fundamental rule of trial procedure—a lawyer should never ask a question to which the answer is unknown to him or her.

"I think four of them were panic shots," Marianne said. "At least one of them—the fifth, I think—was for revenge. The sixth one I

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was saving for myself. But then the doors opened on fourteen and I was confused. And in one blinding split-second I thought about all the crap I'd heard from my husband over the years about how all the money he thought he had was his freedom. And how all I wanted was to be away from him, divorced and free. And how it was only money, *things*, that tied me to him!"

Again, Waterman objected to Marianne's testimony under cross-examination. And since she'd clearly lost control of the climax to her case on behalf of the State of Michigan versus Marianne Bradshaw, Prosecutor Converse suggested to the judge that perhaps a short recess would be in order to clear the air. But Judge Struthers instructed Mrs. Bradshaw to continue.

"I thought," she said, "in that split-second how cheap it was to get rid of my husband. I fired six bullets into this man who was so convinced he was *so* smart and *so* rich and *so* free. Each bullet cost me eleven cents. So what I got in that elevator was a sixty-six-cent divorce."

"And that was funny to you, Mrs. Bradshaw?"

"That's not what I said. I said it was a joke. Don't you know the difference, Ma'am?"

There was a silence. Then: "No further questions," the prosecuting attorney announced.

"Not guilty, by reason of self-defense."

Judge Struthers rapped his gavel and the courtroom erupted in cheers and sobs and screams. My old pal Waterman hugged his son. Prosecutor Converse followed a bailiff out a door where she couldn't be mobbed by reporters. Marianne Bradshaw sat still and said thank you to Leon Waterman, shaking his hand, and Jean and Betty got up from where they sat beside me and went to hug Marianne, who was happy to see them but kept sitting there quietly at the defense table while everybody else made all the commotion around her.

She hadn't expected satisfaction from the possibility of this liberating verdict; and now, indeed, there was no share of the happiness in the courtroom for her. She was alone and safe at long last, but thanks only to a violence her husband had once again imposed. There would be a price to pay in survival and change, but only Marianne could sense the cost of her future. Robert was free and clear of all such obligation.

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another distinguished ghost story by

ROBERTSON DAVIES

For the eighteen years Robertson Davies was Master at Massey College, the University of Toronto, he read a ghost story of his own as his contribution to the Christmas party entertainment. We began reprinting these stories with the Mid-December 1986 issue and plan to continue the tradition every year until the eighteen stories are told, as our—and Mr. Davies'—contribution to your Christmas entertainment.

Henry Purcell wrote superbly for the human voice, because he was himself a singer, and in his time, as Organist of the Chapel Royal, he drew great singers around him. One of these was a remarkable bass called John Gostling. Though there have been few Gostlings, one of the finest members of the College Choir was a Russian exchange student, Igor Lvov. Poor Igor . . .

THE KISS OF KHRUSHCHEV

by ROBERTSON DAVIES

Any invasion of this College by uncanny and irrational elements is a source of distress to me. We have here an institution devoted to scholarship; we toil in Massey College to raise what I like to think of as a Temple of Reason. But, alas, from time to time I am forced to recognize that nowhere, not even here, is Apollo the sole shaper of human existence. Dionysian forces are also at work. But there is one element in our college community which, I consoled myself until recently, had never suffered painful invasions from the realm of unreason; that was our College Choir.

They have been with us from the beginning. A merry, high-

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hearted group, they have for eight years welcomed our summers with their song, lent a somber splendor to our Chapel services, and, on such occasions as this, they have marked the season with the widest variety of Christmas music. Nor have they stood apart from the ideal of scholarship which is the chief purpose of the College. They recover, from manuscripts or rare publications, choral music which has been unjustly neglected; they dust it off and bring it into the world again. And that is just how this whole grotesque incident began.

Many of you, I know, find delight in the music of Henry Purcell, who is still regarded as the greatest of English composers. He wrote superbly for the human voice, because he was himself a singer, and in his time, as Organist of the Chapel Royal, he drew great singers around him. One of these was a remarkable bass called John Gostling; not only was his voice of dark beauty, but it was of extraordinary compass. His lowest note was an F—not the F below the bass clef, which any bass can sing, but the F an octave below that—which only a very few exceptional basses can sing. Now, our organist, Giles Bryant, discovered an anthem of Purcell's in ms. in the British Museum; it had quite passed out of the choral repertory because of its exceptional difficulty. It is a setting of the passage from the *Book of Job* which contains the words, "He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: He maketh the sea like a pot of ointment." Obviously Purcell had written this for his favorite John Gostling, because when the sea boils like a pot the bass soloist is called upon to perform an exceedingly long trill on that low F, and when the sea becomes like a pot of ointment an excruciatingly difficult legato passage in the deepest registers of the bass voice is called for, to produce an effect of heaving greasiness which would, properly performed, arouse nausea in every musically sensitive hearer.

Giles Bryant found it last summer, and he and Gordon Wry longed with all their musical souls to revive it in our Chapel. But where were they to find the necessary bass?

We have some good basses, but there have been few Gostlings. Our choir directors were in an anguish of frustrated desire, and the refrain of their conversation was: "If only Igor were here now!"

I should explain that although the male members of our choir are never wholly drawn from the members of the College, several Junior Fellows have, at one time and another, sung with them. Unquestionably the finest of these was one of our Russian exchange students, Igor Lvov. But Lvov disappeared from the College several

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years ago, on the fifteenth of December, and we never heard of him again. Russian exchange students are sometimes summoned home on short notice, for political reasons into which it would be tedious to penetrate now. So, when Igor vanished, we sighed, but accepted the situation with philosophy.

It was on a Sunday night two weeks ago that I was walking with Gordon and Giles along one of the corridors on the lowest floor of this College, listening to their plaints for the lost Igor.

"Igor could have boiled like a pot," sighed Gordon.

"And how he would have handled that pot of ointment," said Giles, almost sobbing.

"I can hear him now," said Gordon, his face beatified by the light of happy recollection.

It was merely a figure of speech, but it filled me with terror. No, not terror; what overwhelmed me was that sense of doom, of realization that once again the forces of unreason had invaded Massey College. Here we go again, I thought to myself; O, ye powers that protect colleges from all that threatens them, let it not be! This year, just for this year alone, let no uncanny thing drag its trail of loathsome slime across our chronicle! But even as I prayed, I knew that it was hopeless. For although Gordon thought he heard Igor's voice only in memory, I was horribly aware that I had heard it in reality! It was just as we were passing a locked door marked *Service 6*.

As quickly as I could, I hurried Gordon and Giles to the gate and bade them goodnight. They walked away, happily talking about music, as I had seen them do a hundred times, and I, with heavy, doomed steps, dragged myself back to the cellarage, to the door marked *Service 6*. With my master-key I unlocked it and went in, shuddering but with the courage of resignation.

"Igor, where are you?" I whispered. "Igor, speak to me."

"I am here, little father," said a deep, velvety voice that seemed to come from the farthest depths of the room. For Service 6, because of the purpose for which it is used, extends far under the quadrangle. Guided by the sound of the voice, I felt my way into its cavelike recesses.

I don't know what I expected to find, but I knew Igor was there, for I never forget a voice. Names I forget, as a thousand humiliations every year makes clear, but never voices. If I had heard Igor, Igor it must be.

"Where?" I whispered, as I crept deeper and deeper into the cave.

"Here," said Igor's voice, seemingly at the level of my knees.

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What had happened? What was Igor's fate? Had he refused to return to Russia at command, and was he dragging out a fugitive's life in this darkest, most neglected, almost forgotten portion of the College? Dreading whatever it was I might see, I lit a match.

Oh, horror, horror, horror! There, in a dank tank, squatted a gigantic frog!

"Igor!" I exclaimed.

"I," croaked the frog.

"Lvov!" I gasped.

"None other," he gurgled.

"What has brought you to this?" I quavered.

"Pride!" said Frog-Igor (for from now on I shall call him that). "Pride in our great Soviet state. Pride in the glory of modern Russia! Pride in the sound of my own voice, which is the worst possible kind of pride for a citizen of a Communist state! Sit down, little father, and I shall tell you all."

I sat.

"Since childhood I have loved to sing," said Frog-Igor. "As a child on the collective, mine was the loudest voice, heard far above the sound of the machinery. As a youth in the university, I was tempted to drop my studies in the crystallization of liquid manure in order to take up a career in opera. But Russia needs crystallized manure, and I stuck to it. But always I sang. Always I was in some choir. And when I came to Canada as a Soviet exchange student, I lost no time in finding a choir which badly needed me. It was a Toronto choir, named after the bourgeois-recidivist-Jew-beast Mendelssohn, and its leader was the mighty Gospodin Iseler."

"The Mendelssohn Choir," said I; "a happy choice."

"Not so happy," said Frog-Igor. "Very degenerate; very tainted music. Trained as I had been in the state-approved people's music of Soviet Russia, I found strong traces of ideological retrogression in this music. But—I must sing or die, so I sang what the Mendelssohn Choir sang, all the time keeping my own reservations about the material.

"At last came this time of year, the winter festival called Christmas, and the Mendelssohn Choir announced that it would offer a large composition unknown to me, called *Messiah*. You will understand, little father, that I was not pleased when I discovered, by going through the libretto with a dictionary, that this *Messiah* was a piece of overtly Christian propaganda. Yes! Shameless. But, I said to myself, these backward countries must take what music they can

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get. This music is degenerately modern to the Soviet ear, but there are a few good tunes and the whole score goes with a swing that is extraordinary when the source of its inspiration is considered. So—I shall consent to sing in it.

"You see, the great Iseler was very kind to me. He created an entirely new group within the choir for me alone. Third Bass, it was called. I admired Gospodin Iseler devotedly. A man of rich spirit and Byzantine beauty, little father, and even in Russia we meet few like him.

"But still there was my problem. What was I to do about the nakedly religious nature of the text? And then I hit on a great idea. I would sing *Messiah* with mental reservations. Whenever the name of the false Hebrew God or his discredited Son occurred, I uttered an indeterminate sound, which, in the Mendelssohn Choir, nobody would notice. But in my mind I substituted the name of our mighty leader, Nikita Khrushchev. And thus, you see, I preserved my integrity.

"Oh, little father, it worked at rehearsal, but when the first performance came, musical enthusiasm betrayed me. It was a great night. Massey Hall was filled to capacity with wealthy bourgeois. The smells of face-powder and mink recalled the worst days of the Czarist regime. I supposed it was because this was a new work we were launching, and I looked everywhere in the audience for the composer, but though many men had long hair, none looked like the picture of Handel on my music book.

"All went well, and my system of mental reservation worked like a—what is it you say it works like—?"

I have a fine academic command of cliche. "Like a charm?" I prompted.

"Ah, good, good!" said Frog-Igor. "Like a charm. But then we approached one of my favorite passages. It is in a big chorus, where everybody sings, 'For unto us a child is born,' but mentally I was singing, 'For unto us a people's republic is born,' and as we approached the climax, with the words *'And the government shall be upon his shoulder,'* I was thinking so powerfully of Comrade Khrushchev that his beautiful, benign face seemed to rise right in front of me and—"

"Yes," I said, "and?"

"And I made a wrong entrance," said Frog-Igor, hanging his huge, warty head in shame. "Before everybody else, I sang, thunderously and triumphantly, *'And the government shall be upon his shoul-*

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der'—meaning Khrushchev, you see—and all at once I felt a most terrible blow, as if I had been struck with a bullet. I raised my eyes from my music and found that the mighty Iseler was looking at me with such hatred, such loathing, such unutterable detestation, that I dropped my score, struggled past all the other basses who sat between me and the door, and ran into the street. Oh, the shame, the bitter shame."

"All that audience knows *Messiah* by heart," said I. "Elmer wouldn't care for a wrong entrance."

"Well you may say it," said Frog-Igor. "As I hurried back to the College I felt worse and worse. You remember me as I was; a splendid figure of a Russian—two meters tall, two meters wide, two meters from front to back—but as I hurried through the streets I felt myself shrinking, and my free stride was becoming more and more difficult. And hot! I was perishing with shame. At last, when I reached the College, I pressed myself under the gate—I could not bear to come under the glance of the Cossack McCracken—and flung myself into the cooling pool. And there, sitting on a stone, with the chill water of December washing over me, I considered my fate.

"It became clear at last. All my life, little father, and all my education, has been a rejection of superstition. Reason is all! So says the Soviet: so also says Massey College. But in Russia, there are still those among our old people who talk of very bad, almost forgotten things. And one of them is the Evil Eye. And I knew the worst: I had done wrong in the sight of everybody; I had spoiled the first performance of this new work, this *Messiah*, and the great Iseler had cast the Evil Eye upon me. And—there I sat in the pool and I had to face it—I had been turned into a frog.

"Since then, I have lived in the pool all summer, and when the coldest weather comes, the good Comrade Roger puts me in here, in this nice wet tank, and I sleep the winter away. But O, little father, how I long to sing again."

I put out my hand and patted Frog-Igor on the head. It was not a pleasurable sensation, but I have never allowed personal considerations to stand in the way of a noble action.

"You shall sing again, Igor," I said; "but first of all we must do something about your personal appearance. Did the old people who spoke of the Evil Eye say anything about how to get rid of it?"

"Yes," said Frog-Igor; "it is very difficult. But you, little father, you are a good, simple man, a real member of the proletariat, and everybody pities you. Perhaps you could persuade him."

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"Persuade who?" I asked.

"The great Iseler," said Frog-Igor. "I can only be restored to human form again by—his kiss."

In old-fashioned books one often reads about somebody being "nonplussed." I had never before paid much attention to the word, but in that instant I understood its meaning fully. I was nonplussed. Frog-Igor was going on.

"Go to him, little father. Fall at his feet; caress his knees. Let him see the tears running down your withered cheeks. Entreat for me. He will not be able to refuse you."

It was now clear to me that, as so often happens in these invasions of the College by the forces of unreason, I was cast for an ignominious, absurdly demanding role. I spoke crisply.

"Useless," I said. "I know Elmer Iseler quite well. If I crept up on him and pawed his knees, I don't know what he might think. You don't understand life in the democracies. All that crawling and cringing and weeping is much too Dostoevskian for Twentieth Century Canada. Isn't there anybody else who could kiss you with the same effect?"

"There is Comrade Khrushchev," said Frog-Igor hopefully. "He has what we call in Russia the Proletarian Touch; it is the sovietized version of what used to be called the Royal Touch."

I knew something that Frog-Igor, during the past seven years, had not heard. I suppose a very limited version of the world's news gets into our pool. So I temporized.

"Too far away," I said. "But what about a beautiful girl? In these situations on this side of the Iron Curtain, it is always a princess who kisses the frog and turns him back into a prince."

"I refuse to be turned into a prince," said Frog-Igor. "It is against all my principles. A bass, *da*; a prince, *nyet*."

"Perhaps a soprano?" I suggested.

Frog-Igor looked as doubtful as a frog can.

"Or a very beautiful contralto," I wheedled. "The most beautiful girl in our choir?"

To make a long story short, I talked him into trying it. I put the situation squarely up to Gordon and Giles, and at the next choir rehearsal Gordon made a very graceful little speech, not harping on the frog aspect of the problem. Only the most beautiful of the women's section, he said, was expected to volunteer.

I had feared this might create a difficult problem of discrimination, but the girls volunteered in a body. So I took Frog-Igor out of the

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little box in which I had brought him to the Choir Room and put him in the middle of the table.

The girls seemed to lose their zeal. Frog-Igor leered and did his best to make himself attractive, but I thought he looked worse than before. One of the sopranos suggested that perhaps a counter-tenor might kiss him, as the frog wouldn't know the difference. Frog-Igor spat up some unpleasant-looking black slime at that moment, and the choir realized that he understood English very well.

There was one noble contralto, a doctor by profession, who said she had had to meet worse problems in the Emergency Admissions, and she would make a start. After all, she said, it was just like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. So she kissed him, and Frog-Igor perked up a little. The other girls were ashamed to back out after such an example of self-sacrifice, and, with a certain amount of gagging and wiping their mouths on bits of Kleenex, they all kissed Igor, and as they did so he swelled and swelled until at last he squatted before us, in the evening clothes he had worn when he was last a man, looking very much like a bass from the Mendelssohn Choir.

Oh, the joy of Gordon and Giles! It was beautiful to behold. They told the girls that every ounce of their sacrifice had been justified, and set to work at once to rehearse the great, rediscovered Purcell anthem. I have never heard anything like it. Igor boiled like a pot, and he slithered richly like grease, and one might have thought that the great John Gostling had been restored to life.

All too soon we realized that Igor's cure was not permanent. Even during rehearsal he showed signs of shrinking again into a frog, but an occasional quick peck from any female singer who had a rest at the time would put him right again. But after rehearsal I had to take him back to Service 6, to the tank.

"These girls, they are not strong," he said; "not strong like our Russian girls. But even a Russian girl could not help me for long."

"Well, you can just put any ideas about a kiss from Elmer Iseler out of your head," I said firmly.

"Ah, no; but there is still Comrade Khrushchev," he said, rolling his great eyes at me.

I knew that Comrade Khrushchev had long since died in disgrace and obscurity, but I thought it better not to tell Igor.

The Sunday came—well, it was last Sunday, not to make a mystery of it—when the great Purcell anthem was to be performed at

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the afternoon Chapel service. Gordon had made it clear that no excuses of illness or having a cold would be accepted from any of the women in the choir, and they all turned up, looking a little discomfited but showing a good spirit on the whole. I brought Igor in from his tank, and after half an hour's hard work they had him in condition to sing.

For the first part of the anthem, I experienced a delight I have never felt before in our Chapel. This, I thought, is the perfection of religious music. And in my dark heart I began to plot to keep Igor in the tank for many years, and let him out only for services and recording sessions which would bring the College the ample funds it so badly needs.

Igor's voice was superb. As he sang, the deep did truly boil like a pot, and the sea was like a pot of ointment. But then came the later section of the anthem, very solemn, very noble, where the bass and tenor soloists together declare:

"Upon earth there is not his like,
Who is made without fear.
He beholdeth all high things:
He is a king over all the children of pride."

It is tricky work, that duet, and Robert Hurd as tenor, and Igor as bass, had to watch their step carefully. I became aware that while Robert was firm, Igor was rocky. There was an excitement in his voice that alarmed me. And then, suddenly, he made an obvious, a gross mistiming—he came in too early, and an instant later there was a horrible croak, a sound as if gas were escaping from a large balloon, and the anthem sagged to a chaotic end.

Luckily, this happened near the end of the service, and as soon as the benediction had been pronounced I sped to the Choir Room.

Poor Igor! He sat damply in the middle of the table, a frog again. A contralto—that good sport, the doctor—was puckering her lips, but I knew that would do no good now. Gordon was standing in a corner, with his face to the wall, muttering incoherently. Giles, to my horror, was kicking the organ savagely. The members of the choir looked shocked and shaken, except for Malcolm Russell, who was chuckling.

I knew what had to be done. There are times, happily few in number, when I have to exert authority in this College.

"Mr. Wry, Mr. Bryant," I rapped out. "I will have no exhibitions of the Evil Eye in this College. Kiss Igor at once, both of you!"

"Won't," said Gordon.

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Giles is an Englishman. "Shan't," said he.

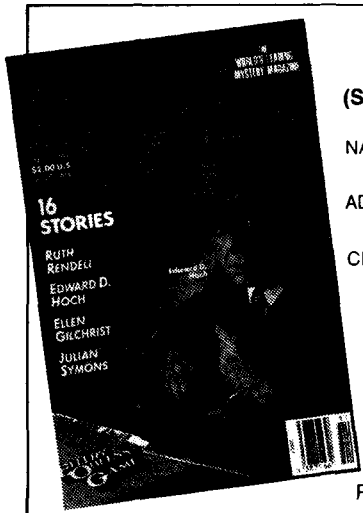
I knew I was beaten. There is no arguing with musicians when somebody has foozled an entry. It was Robert Hurd who explained the situation to me.

"During our last passage, about the power of God, it was pretty obvious Igor got to thinking about Nikita Khrushchev," he said, "and when he came in wrong, both Gordon and Giles rounded on him at once, and he was caught between their glares. Poor old Igor."

Poor Igor indeed. When I picked him up, he was sobbing piteously for the Kiss of Khrushchev. So I put him in a little box, with some fresh lettuce leaves, upon which I sprinkled a few grains of caviar, and I addressed it to Comrade Nikita Khrushchev, care of the Russian Embassy at Ottawa, and dropped it in the mailbox on the corner of Hoskin Avenue.

A dirty trick? Perhaps. But you see, Igor would never have been of any further use to the College.

A special offer for mystery fans...



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a *NEW* Jim Quark story by

ROBERT TWOHY

Quark's passenger waited as he took the turn and got straight on the approach to the airport buildings. "Two hundred plus a roundtrip ticket and any expenses down there," he said, wiggling the twenties in his left hand.

"Down where?"

"Ojai. That's sixty miles north of L.A."

"I know. What's this about?"

"Tell you on the plane."

"Tell me now."

The dude turned his wrist. "Eleven twenty-four. Takeoff's sixteen minutes. Coming or not?"

If you've read earlier Quark stories, you have a good idea what to expect of this one. "Breakfast at Ojai," for instance, won a scroll from the Mystery Writers of America for Robert Twohy, whose contribution to the genre as stylist and storyteller is major . . .

OJAI ONCE AGAIN

by ROBERT TWOHY

I came up the stairs of your rooming house, your door was a little open, you were typing. I got in behind your right ear and whispered, "Kenneth, what's the frequency?"

You yelled, whipped both hands over your shoulder, got my ears, and hauled—the chair skidded and down we went in a bunch.

You kicked clear, saw who I was, and demanded what kind of a numbnut was I, didn't I know a guy your age could drop dead?

Pointing out that you hadn't, I sat on the bed. You threw the chair

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back up and dropped on it, panted a while, and gradually your face deflushed. You snarled where had I been the past six months?

"Back East—New York, Boston, Atlantic City, soforth."

Where was I staying?

"At the hotel, till I find a place."

You said you'd asked about me at the cab office and they showed you the postcard I'd sent from Reno saying I'd hit a big one and would see them when I saw them.

I said I *had* hit a big one—not in Reno but in Southern California, where I got into something that maybe you could make into a story.

You looked interested, as you should—as four or five times you've made stories out of things I got involved in, giving me a cut when they got accepted.

You went down the hall for water for the plug-in coffeepot and for the next hour I told you the events of last August.

You interrupted just once. "Ojai?"

I said that's where it started.

You said that four years ago I went to that town and got in a mess and swore I'd never go there again. I said I hadn't—the action spilled out from there and I followed it to various towns around.

When I finished, you got up and prowled around, then grunted, "Too complicated. I'm working on something and can't take time to shape this." You sat, looked at me a while, then: "*You* shape it. Borrow Lisa's recorder, organize in your head what you want to say, make a tape. I'll throw out what I can, type a few drafts, then a final copy. Might work. If it does, we'll split even."

I said I might give it a whack, why not?

"Start with an introduction that makes it clear it's your story, 'cause I'm not going to do much—this one's on you."

So there's your introduction and now comes the story, starting with a call to pick up at the Bowhart and a big dude in a grey suit slinging a scarred-up but quality suitcase in back and flopping beside me, snarling, "United"—a good run on a slow Sunday morning in August.

Every time I glance, hard blue eyes are sizing me up. Finally, we're passing the Hyatt complex opposite Broadway and he mutters, "You look like me twenty years ago."

Okay. He's my height and frame plus forty pounds, with facebones under the flab you might say are like mine, nose and chin with a

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jut like mine. His hair's mostly grey but brown places are close to my color.

"I used to do things on impulse," he said. "Still do sometimes. You?"

I shrug a hand. We're a mile from the airport.

"Come down with me," he suggests. Sprouting from his left hand is a group of $20s.

I ease right for the turn.

"I'm not gay, if that's what you're thinking."

I tell him I'm not thinking anything, just listening.

"You remind me of me, I used to be pretty good in a pinch. I get a feeling I might want you handy."

"For what?"

He waits as I make the turn and get straight on the approach to the airport buildings. "Two hundred plus a roundtrip ticket and any expenses down there." He wiggles the bills.

"Down where?"

"Ojai. That's sixty miles north of L.A."

"I know." That's all I say. I'm not about to tell my Ojai story, I want his. "What's this about?"

"Tell you on the plane."

"Tell me now."

Fingers close on the money as he turns his wrist. "Eleven twenty-four. Takeoff's sixteen minutes. Coming or not?"

I'm on the curve, United upcoming. "Who's asking?"

Right hand forks over a card and I read, *Joseph Pardoe, Empire Rock Company, Simi Valley, CA* with a zip and phone number. "I own it. I also have business interests in L.A., the Bay Area, and other places."

I put on a look like a cabdriver who's heard all the big talk. He growls, "You asked, so I told you."

"How long are we talking?"

"Till tomorrow night. If longer, a hundred a day."

"When do I get the money?"

He spreads fingers, and before bills start wafting I grab, wad, and stuff into my breast pocket as I pull up at the middle door of United.

The meter says $14.40. Another twenty comes my way, which gets slid into the right-side pocket with cab money. "Want change?"

He flops a hand and hauls himself out. I stretch back and down for the suitcase, which I fire across the seat. He snarls that he'll get my roundtrip ticket and be at the desk—what's my name?

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"Jim Quark. What if I don't show?"

"I'll find you next trip. How d'you spell it?"

"Like it sounds. Close the door." I see that a quick rip will get me out to the far lane, which peels back to the parking levels, and inside a minute I'm pulling into a slot, where I pick up the mike.

"Forty-nine complete, but this wreck is knocking and blowing smoke. I got it to second level, Row B—send the mechanic and have him turn in my tripsheet. I'll call in a day or so. —Forty-nine out of service." I cut out before Fuzzbuzz, the dispatcher, can start screaming.

Pitching the key in the ashtray and slamming the door, I romp down the ramp and push into United, where Pardoe, at the desk, waves tickets, then turns and bops away, an overweight rich dude who followed an impulse because I look like him twenty years ago when he was pretty good in a pinch.

I'm okay sometimes, sometimes not. It depends on the pinch.

I bop after.

On the plane, he talks. I ask questions and gradually get a line on what's up, and the people involved—him, his wife Ellen, his sister-in-law and her husband, and a soft-talking man on the phone who said his name was Rick.

Also a live-in cook-and-maid named Maria and an over-the-hill black labrador.

Like you said, it's complicated, but I'll tell it not like he told me but like I got the shape of it by the time we got to LAX.

About 7:30 that A.M., his wife called the Bowhart and he wasn't there. She told them to put a note on his door that he should call her as soon as he got it.

I asked where he'd been.

He growled that that didn't matter, and my guess was overnight with a woman, at her place or a motel. Where else? Church?

If his wife yelled where was he at 7:30, he didn't mention it. She said to call her on a pay phone as she didn't want to talk on the hotel switchboard, and when he did she said that a guy had called about 7:00 and said in a soft, southern-type voice that they had her sister and if cops were called they'd kill her and bury her in the desert somewhere she'd never be found.

Ellen yelled what was he talking about—her sister was in the guest room. He said how wrong she was. He said he was calling from a pay phone, his name was Rick, and this was the situation—

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Last night about 3:00, he and another guy had come in a window, and in the dim hall had nearly piled into a woman in yellow pajamas they'd assumed was her, Ellen Pardoe, and thus threw the sack they'd brought over her head and hustled her out the front door and around to their car, where a third dude was wheelman. They gave her a shot that zonked her and hadn't known who she was until a while ago when she came to and said she was Susan Briggs, Ellen Pardoe's sister—who they knew existed, as they had researched the setup, but had no idea that last night she was at Pardoes'.

She lived in Ventura, twelve miles west on the coast, in an apartment near the college with her new husband, Judson Briggs, who last night was up in L.A. at a writers' convention, being a writer or said he was.

Here I'll tell about the Briggses, then get back to Rick on the phone.

Pardoe described Briggs as slim, dark, good-looking, mid-twenties, stylish. Smooth manner. Susan was thirty-seven and on the chub side.

Pardoe thought he'd better be wary of this new brother-in-law. He smelled an operator, a con man. He grunted, "I can spot 'em, being kind of one myself, like most guys in business."

Briggs said he was from Oregon. An orphan, various foster homes, on his own in Portland at sixteen. This and that for a living, then three years ago articles he was sending to tabloid-type magazines started hitting and he moved down to the Bay Area, where he lived in hotels and apartments in various locales.

Pardoe didn't push for specifics as to his past, as Ellen told him to cool it—Susan had a glow for the first time since Roy died, so don't bug Judson. So Pardoe behaved and kept his suspicions buttoned. (Roy was Roy Cady, a C.P.A. in bad health, who after eight years of marriage to Susan and no kids died two years ago, leaving her enough insurance to get by.)

Susan had liked marriage to a soft-natured guy that cherished her. So after a short period of going to pieces, she set about finding a new husband.

She got a job as receptionist at a dental office in Ventura and met guys with varieties of gum trouble but nothing meaningful developed. She began fixing herself up and hitting the singles joints on weekends, sometimes taking guys home who the next day were gone. But she told Ellen, who told Pardoe, that somewhere out there in

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the night was the special person looking for her as she was looking for him, and destiny would be met, she knew it.

Last April, Judson Briggs got an urge to try L.A., see if he could make studio connections. Packing his Volvo on a Saturday, he drove south, starting in the midafternoon.

I-5 is the fast route to L.A., but people told him 101 was prettier, so he took it.

It's eight hours, more or less, including a long haul through the mountains that comes down shortly north of Santa Barbara. Briggs told Pardoe he got tired and thought he'd find a motel and do the last whoop in the morning, hitting L.A. with bounce.

Turning off at Oxnard, he pulled up at a bar called The Orange Tree, and after a drink was ready for a motel. And Susan Cady came in, dressed and made-up and quaffed, if that's the word, for her destiny. He looked at her and vice versa and it was magic, she told Ellen later, who told Pardoe, who didn't think so.

Briggs drove behind Susan to the apartment near the college and next day didn't proceed to L.A. Four days later, they were in Vegas getting married.

Back to Rick on the phone—

He told Ellen that if she wanted to see her sister again, she'd have to have Pardoe get up ransom as their research had showed that Briggs didn't have any money to speak of.

Ellen said her husband was out of town. Rick said they knew that, which was why they'd pulled the snatch last night, winding up with the wrong sister. He said to get Pardoe home, and sometime after dark he'd call. He warned again no cops and said to warn Pardoe and Briggs, who Susan had told she was spending the night at some hotel in L.A.—also to warn the live-in cook-and-maid, who they knew about.

I asked Pardoe was he going to pay? —Yes.

And not call the cops? —Later, when Susan was home.

"What makes you think they won't kill her, or haven't already?"

He sighed. "She's Ellen's little sister, and for now I have to play along with this Rick."

I learned about Ellen—chubby and fair-haired like Susan but twelve years older. They had different fathers, so took after the mother, I guess—she raised them in a grubby part of L.A.

In 1967, working in an auto-parts store, Ellen met Pardoe, peddling used cars then, originally from Virginia or somewhere. Shortly they were married. Inside a year, he bought an old one-story rancher

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near the Ojai Country Club, back from the road and facing away from it onto a wide field belonging to somebody. Driveway circles the house. To the rear, property's mostly undeveloped—stunty trees and tall grass. Pardoe likes it that way—like Virginia, maybe.

He detailed the layout, proud of his spread and that he'd had the guts to buy it just after buying Empire Rock, a piddly operation then. He'd decided he was going to be rich and needed to get located where he'd start meeting rich men, learning how they operate and how he might use them to speed him on his way.

He didn't spell all that out but it was what I got from what he said and didn't.

Susan had been married early to a young dope king who shortly disappeared, no doubt fatally. She worked in a drugstore. The mother died and she moved to Ojai to live with the Pardoes and help with their two kids. A while later she met Roy Cady.

Pardoe was right, he had a knack for big money. Now he was an American success story, able to get up ransom tomorrow to pay off a kidnap gang who the head of might be his new brother-in-law, who may have hired three goons to pull the job while he was off scene in L.A.

But not knowing for sure, Pardoe would play along with Rick for now.

I asked, "What do you want me for?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. But I have a feeling about you."

Which didn't make sense—but impulse doesn't, you act on it or not. He was acting and here I was.

Neither of his kids was home last night, being off somewhere or other. In the big old rancher were Ellen, Susan, Maria, and the twelve-year-old lab.

There's no alarm system and no fence around the grounds. Ojai has a sharp P.D., like most rich men's towns, and, never having had an intruder, Pardoe had stopped thinking he ever might.

Spider, the lab, crashes in the carport and is supposed to prowl around at night, but nobody knows if he really does. Last night neither Ellen nor Maria, whose room is off the kitchen, heard him or anything else.

Maria's been with the Pardoes nine years.

After Rick hung up, Ellen ran to the guest room and saw for herself that Susan was gone. Her clothes were on a chair and her overnighter under the bed. She told Maria and they went out front where a grass slope lets down to the driveway, and pegged down left

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toward the triple carport where Susan's old red Tempest was and looked in it, knowing no one would be in it.

They went around the wing where the bedrooms are, Ellen's at the end, then the daughter's, then a bathroom, then Pardoe's den, then the son's room, then the guest room off the living room.

Pardoe didn't mention a bedroom of his own. I guessed that he joined Ellen at night, or maybe not—maybe he had a couch in his den. He didn't talk about his sex life or lack of it, with Ellen or anyone else.

The women didn't see a broken window—which figured, as they had got as carefree as Pardoe as to security. Rick and his pal might have had their pick along the wing—try a window, come on in.

Spider came ambling up with nothing to report, or had been paid off and was keeping his lip locked.

We got the order to buckle up and the plane came down. Pardoe said, "I'm not going to bring you to the house. Briggs'll call from L.A., then come out, if he's not there already. If he's in on it, he might take you for a cop and pass the word to kill Susan."

"You think he'd do that?"

"I dunno what he'd do. But I'm going to put you up at a hotel in Ventura."

We debarked, him lugging the suitcase. After pooping along a while, his face got red. When he started listing, I took it.

At a parking lot, we got into a red Pinto wagon, eight or ten years old and needing a wash. A fatcat drives a power symbol or a heap that shows he doesn't need a power symbol. Either way it's a symbol.

A few turns got us on Ventura Freeway, and we were northbound, passing turnoffs to various hamlets, including Simi Valley, home of Empire Rock. Shortly came up billboards for Oxnard, lying ocean side of the Freeway.

He took an offramp. "You might need a car. Guy works for me has a pickup for sale—I'll see if he'll rent it."

We got to some houses and he stopped in front of one that had a clean old blue Chev pickup in the drive, early Sixties. We got out and I leaned on the Pinto and watched him up a porch, where a whiskery thin bird appeared.

They talked and Pardoe passed him money. He went inside and came back with a key, which shortly Pardoe was handing me.

The pickup fired with a sweet, soupy roar, and when I laid off it

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chortled like eager to ramble. Detroit built pickups in the early Sixties.

The gauge said Full. I yelled at the bird was it true? He said yes.

Pardoe passed three $20s through the window and said that at the Surfside Motel, foot of Seaway Avenue, I should get a room with a phone and after Rick called he'd call me.

I followed him on the Freeway, the old Chev sauntering sportily. A few miles and he flopped an arm, indicating the next turn for me as he stayed on the Freeway.

Shortly, I had a room on the ocean side of Surfside, second floor, with phone, TV, and balcony.

I counted the take so far—$236.00 plus coinage, plus a return ticket to SFO. Not bad for a half Sunday that had started with a $5.00, three ones, and coinage.

I strolled the long beach and put down a fair meatball sandwich at a joint on the pier. When the sun fell in the ocean, I was on the couch watching a *Big Valley* rerun, best show of the night whatever else was on.

It ended and I came back to here-and-now, and Pardoe was in a chair watching me. I said I thought he was going to phone.

"Decided to come." Hard eyes had a cloudy look.

"Rick call?"

"Yeah. He wants two hundred grand. One fifty in hundreds, the rest in tens and twenties."

"You have two hundred grand lying around?"

"I happen to have some deals working and cash in the bank. He says to put it in a suitcase, front floor right of the Pinto."

"Can you get two hundred grand in a suitcase?"

"Easy. A hundred bills to a pack, forty–fifty packs so high." He separated thumb and finger about three-fourths of an inch—apparently packing big money in a suitcase was an old story to him.

He sat quiet. I asked what else was on his mind.

He growled, "Ellen says if you're like I was, you could do something crazy and get Susan killed."

"Like what?"

"She says we do what Rick says and after Susan's home I can get cops or anyone I want—not until then."

I got up and walked around, thinking that Ellen made sense—either

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you get the cops or you go along with the kidnapers, you don't try to slide a cabdriver in on the side. "Why'd you tell her about me?"

"Thought she might have an idea."

"What to do with me, you mean. And she said nothing doing, she doesn't want me. And you said okay, because it's her sister. Okay—d'you want money back?"

He shook his head.

"Was Briggs at your place?"

Yes.

"What did he think of me?"

He didn't think anything—didn't know about me. Pardoe had told Ellen on the quiet.

"D'you think he's in on the kidnap?"

"He might be."

"What's your impression of him?"

"Says the right things, looks scared, anxious. —I'll find out after Susan's back."

"If."

"Yeah, if. Ellen says all we can do is hope and pray, and play ball with Rick."

I leaned on a wall. "What else did he tell you?"

"That I go to the bank in the morning, get the money, and go back home. He calls about noon about where to deliver. I go alone to where he says. I'll be watched, so any funny stuff and the deal's off, Susan gets killed."

"Where's Briggs supposed to be while you're delivering?"

"Rick says he stays at the house. Same for Ellen and Maria."

"When will they free Susan?"

"When they get the money, he'll call me where to pick her up."

That seemed to be that.

He sighed. "I had that strong feeling I was going to use you in some way." But Ellen thought no and it was her sister, so she was calling the tune.

He was at the door. I asked about the pickup. He said to leave it in the Surfside lot, he'd bring the guy for it Tuesday. I said I'd put the key in the ashtray.

He said thanks for coming and left.

So I was out of a case I'd never been in.

From the balcony I gazed out on the ocean in the moonlight and

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thought that Ventura was a nice town for overnight. So was Santa Barbara, thirty miles north.

Judson Briggs, weary of driving, had passed up both, pulled in at a bar in Oxnard.

In strange territory and late at night, I'd line up a motel before going questing for a drink.

He's not me. I'm not slim, mid-twenties, and stylish.

I ambled around the balcony and other notions came poking.

101's the scenic, I-5's the quick route to L.A. Briggs chose scenic. But leaving in midafternoon meant traffic, then a few hours of daylight—what good's scenic after dark?

With a long drive ahead, I wouldn't leave late afternoon—unless I had a late date in L.A., midnight or after. If I did, I sure wouldn't go 101. I'd take the quick route, I-5.

But I-5's no quicker to Oxnard, being fifty miles inland. 101 would be the sensible route if the objective was Oxnard.

I wouldn't worry about a motel if the guy I was meeting had written that he'd put me up for the night.

Why a meeting so late, midnight or after? Why The Orange Tree? Maybe the guy worked there, on the late shift.

Maybe the plan was Briggs would have a few drinks, something to eat, and follow the guy to his place when he closed the dump at two.

Briggs hadn't mentioned to Pardoe that he'd stopped at The Orange Tree because a friend there was going to put him up for the night. Contrary—he'd said he was on the point of leaving to hunt up a motel when Susan arrived.

So he hadn't wanted anything known about his friend at The Orange Tree.

I didn't know if any of that was true. But I had the tingle in the head I sometimes get when random notions come together and make a scenario.

I went in and in the phonebook looked at a small ad that said that in Oxnard, The Orange Tree was where Loving People Meet—address on Thayer Street and a phone number.

A low, pleasant man's voice said, "Orange Tree." I said mopily, "Lost my wallet—anyone turn one in?"

"Negative, partner."

"All my papers. You were on last night?"

"Until two. No wallet."

I cursed feebly and we hung up.

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So he had worked last night. Which didn't mean he'd worked a Saturday night last April, or hadn't.

On the edge of Oxnard, I stopped at a station and found how Thayer relates to the main drag, and a few minutes later proceeded south along it to a stucco shack on the southeast corner painted dirty orange, with a dirt lot in front where three cars sat, and off to the side a square grey van. Sunday night wasn't big with the Loving People.

Blown-up photomurals put you in the middle of an orange grove. Each blue-checked table had three wax oranges in a plastic basket. I've been in tackier singles dumps, and less.

Two tables had couples. Strung along a short curved bar were two guys and a woman, uninterested in each other or in me as I slunk up. The bartender was a rangy dude my age with styled red hair and a bony pale face featuring narrow green eyes that had seen things. He fit my scenario and I had that tingle in the head.

He murmured as to my pleasure—no hint of the South, but talk slow, drop a few r's and g's, and you've got South—for non-southern ears, anyway.

A margarita set me back $3.75. I commented that I'd been in here last April, on a Saturday—"You served me."

If he'd said, "Wrong guy, pal, I wasn't working here then," I'd have trashed the scenario. But he said softly, "Possible—I don't quite place you."

"No reason you should. I remember you because you look a lot like a friend of mine who drives cab in Reno, or used to. You wouldn't be related, would you?"

"Friend have a name?"

My lips went fishlike to make an R as in Rick, went on to say, "Rrupert Johnson."

"No Johnsons in my tree."

I nodded, like that settled that.

Rick's a common name, which was why the guy on the phone had used it. Even so, if I'd hit this been-around dude with the name, and he was the guy, he'd have got a jolt. Which was what I'd been angling to catch in the green eyes—signs of a jolt. But I'd pulled back my hook, flashing on what Ellen had feared of me—doing something crazy.

If this was Rick, and he got the hint of cop, the gang might do just what he'd said they'd do—kill Susan and bury her.

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Stepping down the bar, he raised the soft voice a notch. "Last call, folks." Meaning that on a slow Sunday night, he was wrapping up at midnight.

The lady at the bar said sadly, "Double me up, Les." One of the couples was gone, the other said they were fine. Guy at the bar had a beer, the other split. A minute later I did same, leaving $2.25, which earned me a thin smile and a soft invitation to stop in again.

Now two cars were in the lot, plus the grey van and my pickup. I circled a block and back a little ways south, and cut the lights.

One of the cars came my way, with the couple—then the other went the other way. I sat tight. My money was on the grey van that had sat at the edge of the lot, where an on-duty bartender would park his wheels.

At 12:23, it nosed out and went the other way. Big square taillights got bright as it stopped two blocks north, then made a right. I got there and a sign said that way to the Freeway, north and south.

We came out of the go-around heading north, me one of various cars holding around sixty behind the square taillights.

Three miles and they curved into a right-turn lane, and with a car between we made the Seaway turn and headed beachward.

Two blocks and it peeled north, two more it went west. I got to that corner and saw nothing moving ahead.

The street sign said Placer. I eased along, gazing in driveways between two-story apartments. No square grey van. But to the right in the last block, I spotted a rangy dude on a stairway and a bulb on the landing lit up styled red hair.

So he'd gone to his burrow less than three blocks from where Pardoe had put me. Destiny, or just dumb chance? Neither? Both?

I lay on the couch in my room thinking about it—but not for long. Breeze and soft ocean-mutter coming in through the open balcony door cast their spell. I got a blanket and the pillow from the bed, got all cozy on the couch, and signed off.

Six A.M. is the best time in August on the Southern California coast.

I sloughed up to Placer and into the driveway next to the building where Les had showed me his hair and looked at the square grey van in the general carport.

Strolling to it, I shot some glances around, then tried the rear door. Locked.

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The side window was black glass, the front windows both sides and windshield gave no view into the back. All I was sure of was that Susan's trussed-up or dead body wasn't in front.

I eased away before someone spotted me from the window and did something.

On the long beach, it was me and the shorebirds. Beaches can hypnotize when there's no one to distract. I came to and was way beyond the pier, near a big hotel where I found a breakfast room and ate like money was no object. True. I didn't hurry—if I got back and the van was gone, that'd be destiny—maybe a break for everyone, including Susan.

Back at the Surfside, I fired up the Chev and shortly drove past the van in the carport and set up at the end of Placer, aiming east. My watch said 10:24. If Les was Rick, he had a call to make at noon, not from home.

He probably wasn't Rick and didn't know Briggs, and three other guys had pulled the snatch, with or without Briggs. I was on a fantasy tour and Ellen had been right to want no part of me.

Time passed. I hitched around, stretched across the seat, rolled my jacket under my head, and started to sweat in the rising sun.

At 11:23, the grey van nosed out of the driveway.

We went under the Freeway and south on a boulevard, then east, and shortly were on a two-lane highway passing through farmland, three or four cars between. After twenty minutes, outbuildings of a hamlet came up, and a sign—Norwood, pop. 2400-plus.

We jockeyed in town a bit and came out on a narrow road with empty lots and some storage sheds and an abandoned gas station with a beat-up phonebooth, where he pulled in.

I proceeded past a rise that put me out of his range, turned in a driveway, and came back, topping the rise as the van pulled out and moved away up the road.

So he had made his phone call and was heading back to Ventura. But it was only 11:47. And closing in, I saw the phonebooth had no phone.

I poked along till he was gone, then went back to the station.

The phonebooth had rotting walls with rained-out scrawls, none recent or readable. The floor was leaves and dirt and various garbage, including shreds and globs of paper, one in a corner not a glob but a trim-looking wad, pale-blue.

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I opened it and saw in careful penciled letters, EL PADRE. PARK SAVEMOST. WALK BACK HEATH COT. WAIT—R.

Let R. stand for Rick and a new scenario took shape—partially, anyway.

Rick calls Pardoe, directs him to the phonebooth and the blue wad. Pardoe heads for a town called El Padre, where there's a Savemost Super, puts the Pinto in the lot there, walks back to Heath Cot—Cottages?

And waits for what? A phone call?

Leave him there, bug back to the Pinto, watch Rick open the passenger door, pluck up a suitcase from the floor—or maybe *not* Rick but somebody he's called, who'll make the pickup.

Pardoe would lock up. But not if Rick told him on the phone not to.

So why not tell him everything on the phone? Why write him a note and make him drive to Norwood?

Because Rick wants to be sure he's alone, and no one following. So after his call, Rick will hustle back here and have an eye on the phonebooth. It's 11:53 and he's about to call or is calling or has just called Pardoe and is on his way here.

I wad the note and drop it where it was and am gone.

Fantasy has turned into reality and I can call Pardoe, who can call the cops, who can quickly nail Les and Briggs, too, who is in on it if Les is, as he is, but others may be, too, who might think that the best thing for everyone would be to finish off Susan, potential witness, and bury her in the desert, never to be found.

I get to Norwood on my own and might as well go to El Padre, if there is such a place, and see how my new scenario shapes up.

I stop at a station and look at a map, and learn that twenty miles south of 101 and nine miles inland is a dot titled El Padre.

Pop. 18,000-plus. Just beyond a city-limits sign is a short stone bridge across a dry gap, and just beyond it, left side of a right curve, is a scatter of shacks under a sign, HEATH'S COTTAGE HAVEN. A quarter mile and the road gets wide, and immediately right is the parking lot of a big, up-to-the-minute Savemost Super.

Four aisles, twenty spaces each side of each. At 1:20 this Monday P.M., the lot's a third full, cars stacked out from the market. Turning into a space at the far end of the third aisle from the bridge, I gaze around, see that the lot can be entered at either side as well as from

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the end and a red Pinto wagon needing a wash could slide in and I might miss it.

Rick might have followed it from Norwood. Or somebody he called is waiting back up the road I've traveled, to pick it up and follow it in.

Southbound traffic has to come over the stone bridge.

I walk around the curve and nobody's parked or loafing near this end. Maybe Rick's pal is at the other end or farther south, or back at the super at a lookout spot that covers all entries.

I move back from the bridge, crouch on my heels, and, with a look like not too bright, gaze at cars crossing the bridge.

Ten minutes limp by, then ten more. Among the cars passing I see no red Pinto and no grey van.

Maybe the Pinto gave out. Maybe Pardoe overshot the turn of 101 and had to take the next, coming in on El Padre roundabout from the south.

Maybe I blanked for a few seconds and he went by.

I start back to Savemost and stop cold as an overweight guy in old slacks and a workshirt, carrying a grocery sack and a newspaper, humps up the steps of the first shack at Heath's Cottage Haven and in a screen door.

Inside a minute I'm urging the pickup down aisle 3, then back up 2, desperately seeking the Pinto—and punching the brake as a short woman in a sloppy brown jacket and torn jeans troops from between parked cars to my left, lugging a scarred but quality brown suitcase. Grey hair oozes from under a smashed grey hat. Purple shades are the main feature of a plump, grimy face.

She pecks on across the aisle and I go on a ways, pulling in at the end of the stack on my right and watching as she angles across aisle 3 and heads for a big old green Buick all by itself near the top of 4.

Opening the right rear door, she puts in Pardoe's suitcase, then trots around to the driver's door, key in hand.

She's in and reaching for the door but not connecting as I bump her with my hip and slide behind the wheel.

She spins away, lunges back over the top for the suitcase, and I roll over on top of her.

After ten rigid seconds, her body goes loose and she blows a long, whistly sigh. I roll off.

This is happening in the far corner of the lot and some cars pass, but if anyone notices they keep rolling.

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She crouches on the seat, knees up under. Her hat, grey wig, and shades have fallen in back. Her real hair is short, light-brown.

Folding her hands on the seat, she lays a round left cheek on them and gazes at me with clear blue eyes. Clean, quaffed, and made-up, she'd look cute in a chub way. From my range, thirty-seven is a very good age.

She said, slow and thoughtful, "He wouldn't call a cop. So you're the cabdriver."

Which opened things wide. Pardoe had told Ellen about me, no one else—so Ellen had told Susan, or someone else who had told her.

She got the thrust of my thought and sighed, not whistly this time, rocked her cheek on her hand, and murmured, "Twenty thousand was all. We'd go to Paris, he's always wanted to go there. He'd finish his novel—he really is a writer."

"Good. How about a hundred and eighty thousand?"

"She was going to give it back to Joe."

"So her motive was to get twenty grand for you and Jud?"

Yes.

"Why didn't she just ask Pardoe for it?" My thought was that he'd have been glad to finance Briggs to Paris or anywhere on another continent.

"Because he thinks he's so clever, bragging about his fast deals—she wanted to show him how *he* could get taken."

I doubted it. Rich wives don't give husbands lessons in humility, then give back $180,000.

What made sense was that Ellen was playing her own game, which she hadn't told Susan. Maybe she had a lover on the side. With $180,000, it would be, So long, Ojai, *Buenos dias,* Argentina.

But I didn't want to argue, I wanted to find out things. "Whose plan was it, Ellen's or Briggs's?"

"I dunno. They told me together."

"Was Maria in on it?"

"No. She said she'd keep quiet but not do anything, or take any money."

Noble of Maria—or maybe hers was a waiting game. Having figured Ellen's game, she'd wait until Ellen had the loot, then put in her bid.

"Was Spider in on it?"

"You trying to be funny?"

"I guess. But he probably saw when you left the house Saturday night about three and walked to wherever Les's van was parked."

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She looked blank. "Who's Les?"

"Bartender at The Orange Tree."

"Oh, Les. Yeah, I know him. Was he in on it?"

"Didn't Briggs tell you?"

"He said a friend would make the ransom call to Joe—he never said who."

"And you didn't ask."

"Why should I? It was his and Ellen's plan."

True. She was just the pawn in the game—throwaway pawn?

I asked what would her next move have been.

"Go back to the motel."

What motel?

Motel in L.A. where Briggs had driven her Saturday afternoon, picking her up at Pardoes', where she had brought the Tempest. At the motel he'd given her a bag with the old clothes, the wig and shades, and a key to the old Buick we sat in, which had been parked in a lot up from there.

"Whose car is it?"

"Judson said he bought it from a kid for four hundred bucks." He told her to lie low and came to her late Sunday night—told her that at noon Monday she should put on the old clothes and drive to the Savemost in El Padre, watch for the red Pinto, get the money, and drive back to the motel.

"So you didn't follow him from somewhere?"

No. She'd parked the Buick and hung around the corner of the market and saw the red Pinto pull into the first aisle.

"So you were going to drive back to the motel."

Yes. And shortly Briggs would show up, they'd drive to Ojai in his Volvo and give Ellen the suitcase. She'd give them twenty grand and they'd be on their way, over the rainbow to Paris.

Her eyes were clear and starry. She had believed all her adorable young husband had told her and still did.

So Spider was clean—hadn't seen her sneak out to Les's van Saturday night, because she wasn't there and it wasn't.

Ellen's game didn't include harm to Susan, I didn't think—but what did I know? Hate can smolder between sisters or half sisters for years, then take over.

Why would Briggs have Susan wait for him at the L.A. motel? Why not have her drive to Ojai?

Maybe he'd have picked her up at the motel and driven not to Ojai but somewhere in the desert, where maybe Les would join up and

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the men would do what they'd do, and Les would get his agreed cut of the $200,000, and *Buenos dias,* Argentina.

Maybe not. Maybe his cut would be in the head with the edge of a spade, and final repose in the sands near Susan.

Games. Life is a game, and for some people so is death—if somebody else's.

I said, "Wouldn't it be a laugh if Pardoe had a game, too?"

She said slowly, "Meaning?"

"Maybe the suitcase is full of comic books."

Her jaw stretched—so did her eyes. "That's not pos— Is it? Would he?"

I thought so. If a cabdriver could unravel this farce, how could a reasonably bright fatcat with his own money riding miss it?

Stretching back, I got the suitcase, she making room as I flopped it between us, handle front.

I flipped the catch and lifted the top, and we looked at a pile of old clothes.

I said, "So much for big money."

Reaching in plump hands, she dug around, shoving clothes around, feeling—leaned back, clasped her hands, and smiled contentedly. "So much for *you,* Mister Wiseass."

Right she was, this chubby, pretty little crook—so much for me. Tossed in among the clothes were packs of bills, a hundred to a pack in tens, twenties, hundreds.

It was a sight to gorge both eyes on. Not wise. One eye should have stayed on her hands, which must have slid well under her end of the suitcase, palms up. The suitcase leaped at me, firing money and clothes, and half a second later it was hooked over my head.

I got it off, but my hands got tangled in a bathrobe or something looped over me, and a few more seconds passed before I got it off. Then I was gazing out an open door at the rear end of a pair of raggedy jeans flitting between parked cars at the far side of the aisle.

Humping across clothes and money, I was out the door, where I stood a few seconds and got back in. Because Susan wasn't the point any more.

Shortly I walked to the pickup, lugging a scarred but quality suitcase full of old clothes and $200,000, less whatever Susan had managed to glom.

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I drove in by the front shack of Heath's and found out that Pardoe was in Cabin 12.

He was on the bed with a can of beer and sections of the *L.A. Times* around him. I flopped the suitcase on the bed and went and took the one chair.

He breathed a few times, gazing at me, then said in a thin, controlled voice, "What are you doing here?"

"In the neighborhood, thought I'd stop by." I smiled.

"Why'd you take the suitcase from the car?"

"Not me, Susan. Then she threw it at me and took off, probably in the Pinto."

He put the can on the floor, opened the suitcase, looked at the heaps of clothes and money—handled some of it. "Were you in on it?"

"No. I followed Rick around and ran into Susan. We talked and she left."

"She all right?"

"Sure."

"What'd she tell you?"

I laid out the primary points. He said softly, "Whadaya know."

He finished his beer, fired the empty into a wastebasket, and went to the door. "I'm going to call Ellen."

I dumped the suitcase on the bed and laid packs of money back in in nice rows. I was back in the chair when he came back.

I said, "One sixty-eight. If there was two hundred grand, she got thirty-two."

"How much did you get?"

"None."

He growled, "She called Ellen. Said she'd grabbed four packs that turned out to be two hundred and two tens. Comes to twenty-two grand. So somebody's lying."

"Probably, but not for sure. She was in a rush, might have dropped a few packs."

"What are you grinning about?"

"Thinking of some bag lady pecking around for a dime or a quarter and coming on two packs of twenties. Nice picture. Better than some rich fatcat."

He grunted. "Why should I believe you?"

"Don't, if you don't want to."

He looked at me hard-eyed a few seconds, then picked a pack of

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hundreds from the suitcase and lobbed it. I tucked it in a rear pocket. "What else did Ellen tell you?" I asked him.

"That Susan said you came along and almost spoiled things, but she got twenty thousand anyway, plus two."

"Or twelve."

"Yeah. She was sore at me. Ellen, I mean. Said I went back on my word. I said not so—I fired you but you came back on your own."

"Did she say she planned to return a hundred grand?"

"Yes."

"D'you believe her?"

"She says I brag too much. Also she wanted some attention. She says most of the time I don't see her, or hear her. Maybe she's right."

"Probably. Where do you sleep?"

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. Anyway, I guess you're not going to have her arrested, or Susan. How about Briggs?"

"He's gone. He'll meet her at the pier, then they're off for New York, then Paris. She'll leave the Pinto there."

"Paris?"

"No, the pier. The key'll be under the floormat."

"But not the money."

"No." He had a thin smile. "That's a delayed wedding present."

He began to heap clothes in the bag. "He's gone, and now I don't have to worry what game he's working up."

"You didn't answer if you believe Ellen."

The smile got crooked. "Why make problems? It's been an okay marriage, more or less. I've made money, the kids are happy as far as I notice—my age, you don't go for big changes. Now this is out of her system she'll be okay. For now it's over, anyway, and I'll leave it that way."

We went to the pickup. He put the suitcase on the floor and his big feet on it. A few seconds and we were over the bridge. A few minutes and we were northbound on 101.

He asked, "Who's Rick?"

I told him, adding that by now Briggs would have called him and he'd be on the move, too.

"Good. Let him keep moving."

We passed Oxnard. He said, "Turn on Seaway and drive to the pier. We'll see if the Pinto's there."

It was, in the parking area. He put the suitcase in back. "Now follow me, and we'll return the pickup."

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We did that. I got in the Pinto. He said, "We'll go to the house, have some drinks and dinner, talk it over with Ellen. You'll stay the night and I'll drive you to the airport tomorrow or whenever you want."

"Now," I said.

"You mean right now?"

Yes, I told him. Like he'd said, it was over. I had money in my pocket and places to go, and no yen to meet Ellen, who was his problem, not mine.

He drove me to LAX. I went to SFO and bused to Reno.

Those were my two days down there. That's the tape.

He brought it over with Lisa's pocket recorder and we played it. I walked around. "What are you saying—that you stopped a double murder?"

"I dunno. I just told what happened, threw in a few fantasies."

"It's a bunch of loose ends. Did Briggs and Susan get to Paris? Was Maria planning blackmail? Has Ellen pulled another stunt on Pardoe? How about Les—how deep was he in Briggs's plot?"

"How would I know? I've been back East."

"Call Pardoe, bring me up to date."

He shouted, "The deal was that I'd give you a tape! There it is! I shaped it, you type it!"

"It's not finished. Call Pardoe."

He ran around, shouted stuff, then snarled on out. Next day he didn't come, or the day after. That evening I went to the hotel and learned he'd checked out.

Next morning in my box at the post office was a long envelope in his freewheeling script, green ink as always, no return address but a Ventura postmark. Inside were eight pages, both sides, top one dated two days ago.

Dear Welsher—Empire Rock says hes on trip & wont give home number. No listing in book or from op.

Called O.T. & asked for Les. Guy said didn't know him. Other guy comes on & says did I mean Les Paxton. I said yes. He said took off last Aug & was gd btender & had paychk never pickd up so if I see him tell him send addr & he wd send it.

On impulse, asked op listg Roy or Susan Cady. S. Cady listed. Call & its her voice.

I say is me & she says she knows. Ask how much she got and she says 22 gr so bag lady makes out.

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Ask how come back Ventura & where Briggs. Said they drove L.A. nice hotel and next AM he and $$$ gone. She calls Ellen who drives & gets her & she back at apt near coll & dental office.

Think Briggs & Les fight as to 22 grand & Briggs kill him and bury in des. or v-v—Les dead or on run or wd have wrote O.T. for back pay, but not if dead or on run in Arg with $$$. Take yr choice who dead and who on run but one is. Other in des.

Susan says Pardoe tell Ellen glad Briggs gone at tot cost to him $42,236 plus rdtrip ticket, which not too bad as Ellen shooting for 180 gr & Briggs for whole works, which is all fantasy or maybe not.

Maria ok and also Spider, says Susan. Asked why not come down & I call Trailways & bus leave SF 8:25 so will wrap this up & mail it to you down there. Dont expect more as this is it & now you do something.

Q

So he's gone down to Susan, on the chub side. As Melanie says in a song, some people think fatties are nice.

As he describes her, they seem to float about the same distance from reality.

Maybe he's her destiny. That'd be nice. They deserve each other.

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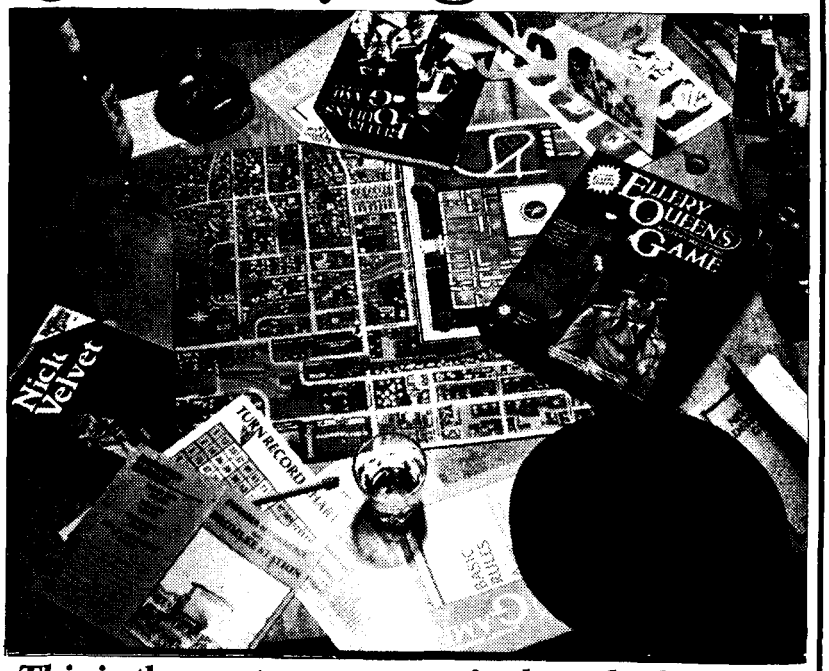

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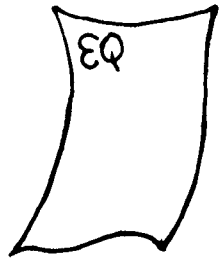

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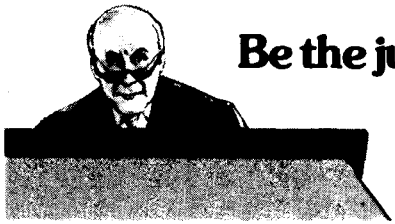

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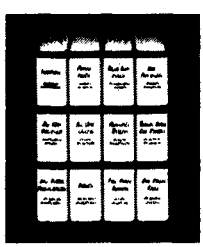

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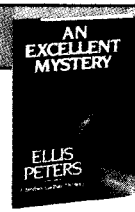

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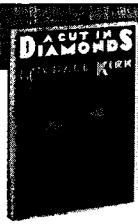

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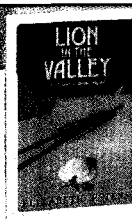

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